

## UW Academic Challenge and Engagement Study (UW ACES):

### Social Welfare

*Angela Davis-Unger, Office of Educational Assessment*

*Linda Ruffer, Adviser*

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### INTRODUCTION

Research on learning in college shows that learning is profoundly shaped by the goals, practices, cultures, and values of the academic disciplines<sup>1</sup>, particularly the disciplinary practices in students' majors. Therefore, if we are to understand the kinds of experiences that students find intellectually rigorous (and, thus, engaging), we need to examine challenge in the major. Understanding challenge in the major is important because at every stage of their college experience, students report that they want to be challenged, that they perform better in courses that are challenging, and that they value classes that stretch their thinking and ask them to demonstrate learning more than they value classes that ask little of them.<sup>2</sup> Although learning about where students experience challenge is important, asking students to describe challenging learning experiences in their majors requires some prior understanding of how those majors operate. The Office of Educational Assessment (OEA) designed the UW Academic Challenge and Engagement Study (UW ACES) to accommodate these needs.

### METHOD

Qualitative methods are recommended when researchers are seeking to understand the complex learning experiences of students, as well as the meaning they ascribe to those experiences<sup>3</sup>; therefore, we designed the UW ACES to be primarily an interview study.<sup>4</sup> Using a "citizen science" model, OEA asked departmental advisers if they would be willing to volunteer to interview seniors in their departments who came in to advising to apply for graduation. Advisers are knowledgeable about their academic programs, understand disciplinary practice in their departments, and are trusted by students in the major, so they have the best chance of gathering good information from seniors about their experiences in the major.

Sixty-six advisers from 33 undergraduate programs volunteered to participate. During the 2012-13 academic year, the volunteer advisers asked students if they would participate in brief (5-10 minute) interviews about challenge in the major. If the students agreed, advisers asked them to respond to four open-ended questions, entering students' responses directly into a Catalyst survey form that OEA researchers had designed for that purpose. The questions were as follows:

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<sup>1</sup> Beecher & Trowler, 2001; Bransford et al., 2000; Beyer et al., 2007; Donald, 2002; Pace and Middendorf, 2004; Wineburg, 2001, 1991; Neumann et al., 2002; Shulman, 1988; Biglan, 1973.

<sup>2</sup> Beyer, et al., 2007.

<sup>3</sup> Merriam, 2001.

<sup>4</sup> One participating department asked students to respond to the open-ended questions in writing.

1. What do you consider to be the most challenging work that you had to complete in this major? And by "challenging" I mean doing the work that stretched your thinking the most. This can be anything—a project, a paper, an exam question, homework, something else you did related to the major.
2. What made the project/class/activity challenging?
3. What did you do or learn that enabled you to meet those challenges?
4. What do you think you learned by completing this project/class/activity?

In addition, advisers asked students in what course the challenging work took place and how many quarters they had until they graduated.

Researchers in OEA conducted training workshops in interviewing skills with all participating advisers, provided individual departments with survey customization if required, and monitored all resulting interviews, reporting back to advisers about the interviews they had conducted. By the end of the academic year, departmental advisers had interviewed 1,237 students, about 17% of the total 2012-13 graduating class. Students' responses were analyzed using a constant comparison method<sup>5</sup>, an inductive process designed to let themes emerge, rather than imposing assumed categories on students' comments.

## STUDY LIMITATIONS

If we interviewed students post-graduation, they would be likely to identify their capstone courses or their advanced senior-level courses as the ones asking for their most challenging work. However, because we wanted to attach the interview to a time when students would normally see their academic advisers, we interviewed students when they came into the advising office to apply for graduation, which often meant that they were two or three quarters away from graduation. Senior-level courses, particularly capstone or capstone-like classes, are those which students often say are their most challenging and satisfying. Although interviewing students as they applied for graduation meant that we might not gather information about late-senior year courses, we felt that it would be interesting to departments to learn the kinds of challenges that lead to and prepare students for those more advanced experiences.

## SOCIAL WELFARE RESULTS

The Social Welfare program in the School of Social Work was one of the UW ACES' 33 participating departments. Linda Ruffer asked 42 students if they were willing to be interviewed for the study and all agreed. The 42 students who were interviewed represented 98% of the 43 seniors in Social Welfare who graduated during the 2012-2013 school year.<sup>6</sup>

### ***Quarters to Graduation and Where Students Experienced Challenge***

Forty (95%) of the students interviewed reported having three quarters until graduation and two said that they had two quarters remaining.

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<sup>5</sup> Merriam, 2001.

<sup>6</sup> The number of undergraduate degree completions is based on the 2012-13 UW Profiles reports published by the UW Office of Planning and Budgeting (<https://uwprofiles.uw.edu/Viz/View/13-SummaryandTrendsDegreeAttributes>)

Overall, the 42 interviewees listed 11 courses, all a part of the Bachelor of Arts in social welfare (BASW), as presenting them with significant challenges. Six students cited more than one course.

Students identified one 200-level courses, six 300-level courses, and four 400-level courses as the sites of their most challenging academic experiences. Approximately one-half of students (52%) identified Social Welfare 404: Cultural Diversity and Justice as the most challenging course in the major.

The list of courses in the major as well as the number of students who identified them (only one if not otherwise noted) were as follows:

SOC WF 201: Advances in Prevention Science: Bridging the Gap from Science to Service

SOC WF 310: Social Welfare Practice I (3; with one student mentioning Macy and one Klika)

SOC WF 311: Social Welfare Practice II (3; with two students mentioning Macy)

SOC WF 312: Social Welfare Practice III (2; with one mentioning Balassone)

SOC WF 315: Community Service Learning (3)

SOC WF 320: Social Welfare Policy (5; with three mentioning Sarka)

SOC WF 390: Introduction to Social Welfare Research (2; with both mentioning Hudson)

SOC WF 402: Human Behavior and Social Environment I (3; with one mentioning Ho)

SOC WF 404: Cultural Diversity and Justice (22; with six mentioning Hayes and three Goodwin)

SOC WF 405: Fieldwork Seminar (Bagshaw)

SOC WF 415: Beginning Field Instruction (3; with one mentioning Bagshaw)

## **1. Students' Greatest Challenges**

Students were asked: *"What do you consider to be the most challenging work that you had to complete in this major? And by "challenging" I mean doing the work that stretched your thinking the most. This can be anything—a project, a paper, an exam question, homework, something else you did related to the major."* About 31% of the interviewees gave more than one response to this question.

One very strong theme and several minor themes emerged from students' responses.

**A course.** About 71% of the interviewees said that a specific course or courses presented them with their greatest challenges in the major. A great majority of these students also identified some aspect of the course that made it particularly challenging—for example, deep personal reflection, weighing multiple perspectives, and sharing experiences with a group (counted in themes discussed below). The following quotations illustrate this category of response:

- *I think the intergroup dialogue classes made me think the most. Just because you had to open your mind to a different perspective.*
- *I would have to say 312 with Mary Lou. We had to come up with a case to cause program change. That really stretched my thinking because we're always talking about interventions and how to apply them but coming up with a specific intervention and the steps to apply them is challenging.*
- *There was one particular course—Social Welfare 404—it really helped you look past your own biases and your own paradigm in which you live. To respect your own and others' identities is bringing something to the table as well.*

- *I'd probably go with the policy course. Coming up with what are the services provided (Temporary Assistance for Needy Families). Also, I didn't grasp and got kind of confused with social security and all the services that social services provides in different areas (Policy and Advocacy and Child and Welfare services, etc.).*
- *The most challenging work was Social Welfare 311, and the book, A Spirit Catches You and You Fall Down. That one really opened my eyes to how much I didn't know about my culture and how oppressive institutions like hospitals have been to other ethnicities.*
- *The 390 class was challenging. Research design and how to formulate research questions as well as evaluating research and doing literature reviews.*

**Personal reflection.** Fourteen (33%) of the interviewees mentioned that the process of taking part in intense personal reflection, uncovering beliefs and biases, was a particularly challenging aspect of the major. Students often explained that they had not previously thought of their identities as they related to others in society until their experience in the major. For example:

- *I think the most challenging thing I did was probably a reflection about myself. Thinking about my membership in society and how that connects to everybody else around me. Probably thinking about who I am and why I am who I am, how I got to this point in my life. This point meaning being a student in social work, pursuing a career in social work.*
- *I think the most challenging part of the program is the reflections that we are asked to do just because a lot of academic work that I've encountered did not require the same degree of internal reflection, your reactions, your positionality, your feelings that you're required to do here.*
- *Talking about personal experiences and how that relates to social work was particularly challenging.*
- *There was a class where I had to explore the different agent and target roles that I had. The difficulty in this form of learning and stretching of personal growth was that there were things that I disagreed with in regard to privilege and disadvantages that I had. It was difficult for me to explore this and I felt like a lot of myself wasn't contributed to what I truly felt.*
- *I think critically analyzing who I am was really difficult. The intergroup dialogue classes and thinking about my identities in the addressing model was pretty difficult. I had not thought about my membership in some agent groups.*
- *I think all the reflection that we do in classes, especially in regards to papers. We do a lot of reflection. Some people think reflection is easy but the level we do is really deep. You have to look within yourself.*

**A paper/writing in the major.** Eight (19%) interviewees stated that a paper, or writing in the major more generally, was one of their most significant challenges. In their own words:

- *Something that came to mind was the Addressing Model Paper (A is age, D is disability) acronym. We had to write a paper on if we were agent or oppressed in those categories. It really stretched my thinking and was really hard for me to think about all the outside influences from social institutions. It was the hardest paper for me.*

- *I would say from my cultural diversity and justice course—the multicultural mapping paper. It was the most challenging because it forced us to not only look into ourselves and recognize where we hold target and where we hold agent identities, but all forced us to look outside of ourselves and to look at other people and where they hold target and agent identities. I think it's always challenging to look into yourself and to get in touch with that and recognize how you are affected by the world and how you affect the world.*
- *In Social Welfare History and Policy 320, we had to write a paper about certain laws related to how it affects clients and agencies and it made me think deeper into it. First, you have to know what the law or policy is and you have to think about how it directly affects clients. It was the most challenging of all the other things I had to do.*

**Practicum/community service learning.** Six (14%) of the 42 Social Welfare majors noted that real-world experiences, including both practicum and community service learning, were among the most challenging aspects of the major. In the words of three students:

- *I'd have to say it's the practicum experience or community service learning. Both of those gave the most opportunities to really explore how we could apply a lot of what we learned in class to our actual work. I think that really stretches your thinking by giving you the chance to work with people in a variety of settings and actually apply what we're learning.*
- *I think right now, the learning contract for practicum is one of the most challenging because it requires an integration of what I've learned in the practice classes and the things I'm doing in practicum. I think it's challenging to identify the specific activities you are going to be doing and how you're going to measure them and also realizing that this is what I'm going to really, really be doing in the future. I think it's just like identifying practice behaviors and being conscientious while I'm doing it. I am being challenged by the actual practicum site and the tasks that I'm being asked to do.*
- *I guess just the fieldwork, community service learning or practicum. Just working with different populations you're not used to working with and don't have exposure to in conventional education.*

**Talking about sensitive issues with a group.** Four (10%) interviewees commented that it was particularly challenging to discuss sensitive issues with a group of people. For example:

- *I would say if we go back to 404 for example, coming from the target group and being the educator at the same time even though there was a professor teaching. Other students from the Asian group want to hear you. It felt heavy. What role are you in? How much do you share? How much do you hold back? I learned so much from the other students. The Asian students stretched my thinking. We were looking at the same issue from a different lens.*
- *Learning how to speak in public about sensitive issues that are relevant to the coursework in a large group.*

**Other.** Two or three students each gave the following responses:

- **Interviewing skills (3).** *I think doing the interviews in the practice class was probably the hardest. It was probably the most practical thing we did and the most useful.*
- **Assignments (3).** *Some instructors are not too specific and sometimes it's hard to figure out what they mean by their assignments. Sometimes I had to redo my assignments when I could not understand what they wanted.*
- **Research skills (2).** *I think the most challenging for me was the research class. I'm not so familiar with research and understanding the terms and reasoning behind that. I would have to say the different research designs that we are learning about now.*
- **Difficult subject matter (2).** *Some theories and frameworks specific to social work were difficult, including evidence based practice or strengths theory (empowerment).*

Finally, individual students gave the following responses regarding the most challenging aspect of the major:

- Lack of structure from the professor
- Amount of reading

## **2. What Made Those Activities/Classes Challenging?**

Next, students were asked to note what it was about the activity they had described that made it especially challenging. The majority of the interviewees identified a single reason the course or project they had described was challenging. One dominant theme and several minor themes emerged from the data.

**Exploring one's own identity.** The most frequently given response--noted by 18 (43%) of the 42 respondents—was that the most challenging aspect of the class/activities in the major involved exploring one's own identity in an educational context. Students often noted that it was an emotional challenge that required them to analyze deeply held, and sometimes previously unacknowledged, beliefs and biases. In the words of eight of those students:

- *It helped you think in ways that my brain didn't naturally default to by constantly having awareness of your own identities that you bring to the relationship. Overall, it just brought a new heightened level of awareness.*
- *It was kind of a combination of the fact that it was a very personal challenge but it was still an academic setting. Having to sort that out and still do the work but also kind of deal with how it affected my actual self was a challenge.*
- *It was an emotional process. I think it was the need to find academic back-up to my experiences. I needed to really dig deep to figure out how my identities affect my position in general.*
- *It wasn't just do research and see what the study found and what the outcomes and results were; it was an emotional process. So it was emotional and it was really observing the system and how it ranks people according to their different identities. I think that is something that the majority of majors at the UW do not offer.*

- *Thinking critically about myself was a challenge a lot of times. A lot of reflections would be responses to a really thought-provoking reading and especially in our social justice class thinking about your positionality and privileges.*
- *I just think it forces you to face your biases and triggers. These are things I don't think we're forced to face all the time. It is really about you. It can be challenging to have certain things come up and have to face that.*
- *I guess it personalized the academic side of the coursework. It would force me to critically analyze my own biases and beliefs.*
- *Well, thinking about parts of my identity that I've never thought about before and becoming more aware of other aspects of my identity. I never really thought about being a person who is physically able as opposed to someone who has a disability and all the hardships that come with that. For example, if there's going to be a ramp to get into the building or rails in the bathroom. I didn't think about those things before.*

**Being open to different perspectives.** Five (12%) of the interviewees mentioned that the class or project was particularly challenging because it required them to open their minds to a wide range of perspectives. For example:

- *I couldn't pick a side as to who was right or wrong because both western medicine and cultural groups had different perspectives as to how to treat a patient.*
- *Being willing to move past what your own beliefs were before and learn with the class and learn from other people in your group—being open.*
- *It exposed me to a lot of different perspectives. It really forced me to examine different viewpoints on how people experience their realities compared with my own.*

**Applying academic work to real life.** Another five (12%) of the interviewees explained that having to apply academic work to real-world situations made these classes and/or projects particularly challenging. In the words of two students:

- *I think it was really applied. We were learning this information and having to apply it.*
- *There are two main things that you have to do. First, you have to know what you're talking about, the policy, and then you have to direct it towards how it affects the clients.*

**Complex subject matter.** Four (10%) of the interviewees noted that difficult subject matter made the classes and/or projects particularly difficult.

- *It's a little early to say. The research theories, perspectives, and studies are all kind of confusing for me, but confusing in a good way. I want to learn more. It might be my weakness, I need to increase strength and learn more.*
- *I would probably have to say the explanation of it. I did the readings but I don't seem to be grasping the concepts. I mean the stuff is fairly new now so maybe that's why. The stats [class] that I took was maybe different from the stats my classmates took. I took my stats at a community college and it was geared towards nursing, so I don't know if that had anything to do with it.*

**Other.** Two or three students each mentioned the following as aspects of their work in the major that made it challenging:

- **Working with others (3).** *Probably the group aspect of it. We were working with groups of four, so agreeing on different types of interventions that you wanted to apply, who you wanted the intervention to be for, the whole process of decision-making. You needed to make sure everyone was on board with what you wanted to do.*
- **Time commitment (3).** *All the time that I had to spend on it when I had other classes to do, doing the extra research and extra pages.*
- **Working with a challenging population (2).** *I had never worked with homeless youth before. They can be more difficult to empathize with. For someone coming from a higher socioeconomic background it can be more difficult to understand the challenges and barriers that these kids who have been in foster care their whole lives have experienced.*

Finally, individual students mentioned the following as challenges:

- Didn't like the subject matter
- Being observed and recorded
- Making the connection between policy and legislature
- *It was challenging because I was faced with tragic circumstances. I was required to take objective notes on very emotionally disturbing cases.*

### **3. What enabled students to meet those challenges?**

About 26% of the interviewees identified more than one source of help for meeting the challenges they described. For example, this student commented on not only completing the necessary readings but making an effort to talk with others to gain different perspectives on the material.

*I read a lot and I talked to a lot of people. There were a lot of class readings and it was helpful to look at those that were difficult and hash those out with friends. They gave me different perspectives and the language to talk about things.*

Overall, three strong themes and one minor theme emerged from interviewees' responses to this question.

**My own efforts.** Twenty (48%) of the interviewees explained that their ability to meet the challenges posed by the Social Welfare major were a product of their own efforts. For example, students spoke of completing the necessary readings, taking part in class discussion, and learning how to do independent research. As seven of the interviewees explained:

- *I just kept reading the textbook over and over and watching the lecture over and over.*
- *I think the willingness to be honest with myself and accept that I might have thoughts and feelings that aren't promoting social justice and then be willing to change and learn.*
- *I learned how to do research and find articles that were helpful. I guess class was helpful, to talk about these things.*
- *Working on it. I was given tools from the program to help me explore those identities.*

- *The work gave me an opportunity to do more research on my own. Even though I couldn't find it in the course work, it pushed me to find scholars and leaders who are not mentioned. I needed to look and do my research to find them.*
- *I had to do a lot of research and gather my thoughts after comparing all of the information. I went on those articles on EBSCO host, those peer reviewed kinds of publications. I collected different background information regarding policy and then looked to see if there's any information regarding how it affects certain populations.*
- *A lot of what I learned in class helped me, like the learning contract. I think what I did was make sure to read and take notes. I took notes on every single assigned article and I still refer back to them. Reading critically and remembering and recalling what I've learned was important in meeting the challenges.*

**Working with peers.** Ten (24%) participants said that they were able to meet the challenges by working together with their peers. More specifically, participants mentioned that they learned to value multiple perspectives and received valuable support and advice from their peers. In their own words:

- *Most of it I would say was just support from everyone else in the course and program because we were all going through similar experiences with it. That definitely helped me to get through it and to learn from it the most.*
- *I suppose I talked with other people about ways they were going about it and getting that insight helped me to think of things and ways I may not have otherwise.*
- *I talked with my colleagues and found out what their perspectives were on the situation. We did a lot of in-class scenarios of how we could approach the problem and solve it together as a team.*
- *I relied on my cohort peers for support, advice, and constructive criticism.*
- *I thought it was working with a group of friends and we helped each other and the books were very helpful. We asked questions and asked the instructor the questions. Working with each other was very helpful. We can exchange ideas and stuff like that.*

**Exploration of one's own identity.** Nine (21%) interviewees explained that they had met the challenges in the major by taking an honest look at their own identities and personal biases, particularly through the intergroup dialogue class. In the words of four students:

- *I cleared my mind and personal biases. I understood that how I identify myself is not the same way that my culture or community might identify me. I understood that there was something I could learn by understanding these concepts and theories on the roles of agents and targets. And so I tried to explore agents and target roles through a clear and open mind.*
- *The intergroup dialogue meetings that we had once a week. That was a place to sit and discuss those identities and how we felt about them. I think that really helped me explore that and go on other people's journeys as they were exploring them.*
- *I think talking with other students in the intergroup dialogue class helped to do that. Talking to people who came from different backgrounds and had different perspectives. We had a white caucus and it helped me to think about my agent identity. We*

*articulated what we liked about having that privilege and what we disliked. What was difficult was talking about something you liked that was oppressive to other people, that helped me learn about that identity.*

- *I learned about my target and agent groups and how they were influential in mine and others' lives. Coming to a decision that it's not my fault that I'm an agent in a lot of categories. I'm an agent in age, race, and ethnicity. The only two groups that I'm a target in is gender and national origin. It's kind of hard to accept the fact that as a social worker, you have dominance in a category, as opposed to others.*

**Having a supportive professor/supervisor.** Six (14%) of the interviewees commented that they had met the challenges in the major with the help of supportive professors and/or supervisors. In the words of three of these students:

- *I would say having an extremely close and supportive cohort and having a teacher that was also supportive and always there. If you needed her, she took the time to talk with you.*
- *I guess just the staff and instructors are very helpful when you have a question. They provide examples that are more relatable. When there's a crazy scenario, it's easier when the instructor simplifies it for you. They found ways to help the memorization process to learn the acronyms.*
- *I think that Mary Lou's process in getting ready for us, the preparation for that project, was extremely helpful. She put it in steps so we didn't have to figure out our whole way through it at once.*

**Other.** In addition to these themes, one or two students identified the following as providing them with help in meeting the challenges they described:

- **Remaining calm/controlling emotions (2).** *I learned to better put my emotions in check. It was hard. It was really a matter of being in court and seeing those cases presented and I'm not going to cry right now. I'm maintaining my professional composure. It was hard. I think it was staying focused on my notes and the reason why I was there helped me rein that in. In the end I was serving a purpose.*
- **Fieldwork (2).** *To be honest, I think it's more of a learning by doing, you learn on the fly. For me it wasn't always something you read in the textbook. It was being there [in the field] and having the classroom support available if needed to complement the fieldwork experience.*
- Practice classes--310, 311, 312(1).

#### **4. What did students learn by completing this project/class/activity?**

We asked students what they felt they had learned by meeting the challenges they had described, and about 21% of the 42 interviewees mentioned more than one lesson learned. One particularly strong theme emerged from their responses, along with a number of minor themes.

**Learned about own identity and its impact on others.** Fifty-two percent of the Social Welfare majors we interviewed said that they had had the opportunity to explore their own identity and, in doing so, had become more aware of its impact on others including the role it can play in patient-client relations. The following examples illustrate this category of response:

- *I guess I learned to accept myself. I always have the feeling of shame when I talk about me or people who are close to me. So I feel like being able to talk about it gives me ownership of who I really am. Knowing myself even more just helps me realize what my biases are and what my standing in the world is.*
- *I feel that I learned how I may affect my environment and how my environment may affect me. I learned that I need to be aware of how others may view me for privileges and struggles. For future work with clients and community members, I need to be able to be aware of my biases and the biases of others towards me.*
- *I believe that I learned that processing my own personal biases and experiences will make me a more well-rounded and critically conscious practitioner in the future. It will help me work with diverse populations so that my personal misconceptions and biases won't affect me.*
- *I learned more about my identities and how they affect me and what I do and how I interact and my values. I also learned about oppression and intersections of oppression. It really opened me up to the LGBTQ experience beyond what I was open to before.*
- *I think I became a more conscious individual. I started noticing things that I've never noticed before and also being more culturally responsive. For example, I began noticing more about cultural differences among myself and others and how to act appropriately in those situations.*
- *I just learned so much more about myself and what my social identity means in terms of what I'm going to be doing with my life and how I interact with people on a daily basis. I think that was huge to learn that in the classroom. I learned how to be a better person—student, friend, and worker and everything that I am—just got a little bit more aware.*
- *I learned about what I bring to the table in any situation. I need to be aware of what I'm contributing in various situations and how that might impact my interactions with others. For example, when talking with someone and they bring up something that's a trigger for you. Being aware of how that is a trigger for you impacts that conversation and how you are able to deal with it.*

**Learned to be sensitive to others' situations/perspectives.** Eight (19%) interviewees commented that they learned to be open and sensitive to others' perspectives.

- *Ultimately I learned about other people's perspectives and how they experience the world in a much different way than I do. That was very eye-opening and there were things that I knew already but it took it to a deeper level.*
- *I learned that everyone's opinions are just as valid as anyone else's. They came to them from their own experience and that was really valid. It really stretched my thinking about how policies and social institutions affect the way we all grow up.*
- *I learned that I respect my beliefs and that there are also other perspectives and I should be open minded to them.*

- *I learned that the mentally ill population has more than one dimension, than I thought in the beginning of my CSL work. There are more layers to understand than them having just the mental illness. There is more to it than that in living a daily life. I think I gained more of a qualitative perspective of a person who is diagnosed with a mental illness and how the systems in place don't cater to them as much as they should and something has to be done for that*

**Gained research skills.** Four (10%) interviewees mentioned that they gained specific research skills including the ability to recognize quality research as well as pose their own research questions and gather materials (e.g., peer reviewed articles) to address the questions. In their own words:

- *I definitely learned how to be a more critical consumer of research literature. I am more able to fine tune the research question and what resources I need to support it.*
- *It is the beginning of the course, and we are trying to distinguish bad research from good research. That is the main point of this class I think, and it requires a lot of knowledge.*

**Other.** Two or three students said that they had learned the following as a result of meeting the challenges they had described:

- **Better understanding of policy (3).** *I learned how to differentiate the services and the different specific divisions. That is, learning what services go to which division so you know which ones to use. You have to say things properly and give out the correct information.*
- **What social workers do (2).** *I guess I learned that it takes people like social workers to really put out those real life stories and reveal the oppression that really does exist.*

Finally, one student each noted the following when asked what he or she had learned:

- Interviewing skills
- How to plan a community intervention
- Court proceedings/rules of the court
- The value in working with others
- *I learned about a systems theory. It is helpful now as we are using this in my practicum site and in my community service learning site. I'm learning how to connect the small system into the bigger system to make change for the long-term.*
- *I am learning a lot about viewing things as a process but not getting so caught up in that process so as to miss specifics. I am learning how to generalize certain things, while not generalizing everything*

## SUMMARY

A strong, recurrent theme underlying students' responses was the intense personal challenge posed by exploring one's own identity and its relation to others in preparation for a career in social welfare. For example, 43% of students mentioned that the process of exploring one's own identity was what made their challenges especially difficult, and approximately one-half said that they had gained greater insight into their own identities and their impacts on others as a result of the challenges posed by the major.

Specifically, when asked about the most significant challenge in the major, the majority of interviewees noted that a course or courses had presented them with significant challenges. Many students also identified a particular aspect of the course that made it challenging including personal reflection, sharing

experiences with a group, and thinking about varied perspectives, among others. In the words of one student:

*There was one particular course—Social Welfare 404—it really helped you look past your own biases and your own paradigm in which you live. To respect your own and others' identities is bringing something to the table as well.*

Participants also commented that writing in the major and community service learning posed significant challenges in the Social Welfare major.

When asked to talk more about why those activities were challenging, students often explained that they required them to thoroughly explore their own identities, an often emotional task that challenged students to analyze deeply held, and perhaps unrecognized, beliefs and biases. One student explained:

*I just think it forces you to face your biases and triggers. These are things I don't think we're forced to face all the time. It is really personal about you. It can be challenging to have certain things come up and have to face that.*

Moreover, students mentioned that the activities were challenging because they required them to open their minds to various perspectives as well as apply their academic work to real-world situations.

Nearly one-half of students explained that their own efforts helped them to meet the challenges in the major. For instance, students reported that they completed all of the necessary readings, took part in class discussion, and learned to carry out independent research. Students also mentioned that they had met the challenges they had described as a result of working with peers, noting that they valued the opportunity to exchange ideas and, more generally, offer each other support. Finally, students spoke of the importance of having a supportive professor and/or supervisor as they navigated the challenges in the major.

In terms of what they learned by meeting the challenges they had described, the most-frequently given response, noted by one-half of participants, was that they gained a more nuanced understanding of their own identities, the interactions of those identities with those of others, and their roles as clinicians. As one interviewee aptly stated:

*I just learned so much more about myself and what my social identity means in terms of what I'm going to be doing with my life and how I interact with people on a daily basis. I think that was huge to learn that in the classroom. I learned how to be a better person—student, friend, and worker and everything that I am—just got a little bit more aware.*

In addition, interviewees explained that they learned to be sensitive to others' situations and perspectives and gained research skills including how to recognize quality research, pose research questions, and gather resources to address those questions.

In sum, students' responses are reflective of the broad goals of the Social Welfare major which aim to provide entry-level social workers with the skills to become effective practitioners with the capacity to understand and solve complex social problems.

Moreover, students' responses to the UW ACES interview questions suggest that Social Welfare majors felt that the challenges they described were inherently rewarding. These responses to challenge are consistent with research on student learning, which shows that when an assignment is challenging for

students and when instructors help students meet those challenges, students are engaged in their courses and, therefore, learn more than when coursework is easy.

### ***One Student's Responses to All Four Questions***

**Course(s) where greatest challenges occurred:** SOC WF 404: Cultural Diversity and Justice

**Q1. What was the most challenging work you did?** *I think critically analyzing who I am was really difficult. The intergroup dialogue classes and thinking about my identities in the addressing model was pretty difficult. I had not thought about my membership in some agent groups.*

**Q2. Why was it challenging?** *Well, thinking about parts of my identity that I've never thought about before and becoming more aware of other aspects of my identity. I never really thought about being a person who is physically able as opposed to someone who has a disability and all the hardships that come with that. For example, if there's going to be a ramp to get into the building or rails in the bathroom. I didn't think about those things before.*

**Q3. What helped you meet that challenge?** *I think the willingness to be honest with myself and accept that I might have thoughts and feelings that aren't promoting social justice and then be willing to change and learn.*

**Q4. What did you learn by meeting that challenge?** *I learned more about myself and where my biases lie. I also learned a different way to see other people, not viewing them based on my assumptions and not making judgments about them based on just what I can see. They are more than what they portray physically.*

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