Social Work Education Canada's North: Capacity Building through Social Work

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Abstract

The Faculty of Social Work program at the University of Regina is a broker for two social work programs north of the 60th parallel reaching the northern residents of both Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal ancestry. In addition, for over 30 years, the University of Regina partners with the First Nations University of Canada where a specialized Bachelor of Indian Social Work is offered and now a Master of Aboriginal Social Work. This paper presents the background to the Northern Human Service/BSW program at Yukon College in Whitehorse, Yukon and the Certificate of Social Work at the Aurora College in Yellowknife. Northwest Territories. The program in the Yukon was started in 1993 after extensive consultation with Yukon residents. The program was developed and offered with the specific social needs, values and aspirations of the territory's First Nations people. Since its inception, over 120 students have graduated and 10 have gone on to complete a Master of Social Work in southern universities. Although, these numbers seem small, they are significant in light of the low number of northern graduates in the past. The program at Yukon College is the only program where students can complete a full undergraduate degree in the north. As the college moves towards a university, they will provide their own degree. The brokered program in Yellowknife began in 2001 is a two year diploma program. With low populations, the program has been moved to different communities and has been located in Fort Smith and Inuvik on the Beaufort Sea. The paper will explore how the social work courses have a northern focus and relevancy to Aboriginal peoples of the north. The paper discusses some of the cultural conflicts of Euro-Canadian society and its social work values in the context of northern Aboriginal communities. It also discusses the strengths and limitations of this kind of broker model of delivering social work education in the Arctic.

Introduction

Approximately one quarter of Canada lies north of the 60th parallel (60 degrees latitude) which is considered the *far north* and due to the Canada's continental climate, this region is truly *Arctic*. For most of Canada's history the north was ignored with agricultural and industrial development occurring entirely in the southern regions within 200 kilometres of the U.S. border. This paper explores the development of social work education in the Canadian Arctic. In its introduction, a brief overview of the political structures of Canada's three territories is provided. The very early years of social work education is discussed followed by an in-depth presentation of the social work program at Yukon College, Whitehorse. A brief discussion of the social work program at Aurora College, Yellowknife is given. Both of these programs are "brokered" through the University of Regina. The paper concludes with a discussion of the issues facing social work education in the north with implications for further growth and development.

Canada's Northern Colonies

Canada became an independent country in 1867 and prior to that date, it was a collection of British colonies. In the mid-1800s, the U.S. was rapidly expanding in the west and at the end of its Civil War in 1865, its military machine at its largest (Durst, 2007). These British colonies feared being absorbed by its large southern neighbour. In 1867, The British North America Act was passed in the British parliament in London. As in the history of Canada it negotiated its powers and divided them between the federal and provincial governments (Durst, 2007). Today there are 10 provinces and 3 territories participating in a federated dominion with a parliamentary system like Norway and the United Kingdom.

Since confederation, the west gradually became populated through primarily European immigration forcing the Aboriginal people off the land and away from traditional lifestyles and onto ghettoized reserves. Most of the north was ignored and when interest did develop,

it was for the exploitation of non-renewable resources such as minerals and hydrocarbons. Southern Canada has always had a colonial relationship with its north.

Today, the Canadian Arctic is politically divided into three distinct territories with only about 110,000 people spread over 3.6 million square kilometres: Yukon Territory (Y.T.), Northwest Territories (N.W.T.) and the most recent Nunavut (N.T.). The Yukon Territory is the most western both geographically and politically bordering Alaska and a longer history of involvement with Euro-Canadians. Its population is predominately non-Aboriginal and its population is centralized in its capital city, Whitehorse. About 25% of its population is First Nations/ Aboriginal.¹ Bordering the mountains and the Arctic treeline is the Northwest Territories with its modern capital city, Yellowknife. The population has a blending of European descent, Inuit (formerly called "Eskimo") and Dene peoples (North American Indian). With a birthrate of 16.6 per 1000, its population is young and growing. It is the centre of new diamond mines and the Mackenzie valley is proposed as the preferred route of a major gas pipeline to feed the energy hungry mid-west America. Nunavut (N.T.) is the youngest Territory, formed in 1999 and is about 85% Inuit. Its population is widely dispersed across a huge geographic area and its birth rate is 26.3 per 1000 and has 34% of its population is under 15 years of age!



Canada's Northern Colonies

Territory	Population	Capital City	City Pop.
Yukon T.	34,400	Whitehorse	20,461
N.W.T.	43,500	Yellowknife	18,700
Nunavut T.	33,400	Iqaluit	6,184

(Canada, 2011).

¹ For the purpose of this article, the term "First Nations" is used to describe persons who are status Indians as defined by the Canadian Indian Act. Aboriginal persons are those who identified in Census 2006 as North American Indian, Metis or Inuit and includes First Nations persons.

All three Territories are formally administered by the Canadian federal government, principally through its Department of Indian Affairs and Northern Development and in that sense they are a "colonies". This federal department manages all First Nations/Aboriginal issues, public lands and natural resources. Paine (1977) calls it "welfare colonialism" arguing that it is dependent both economically and politically on southern Canada. However, each of the territories has its own legislative assembly and elects its representatives for up to four years. The N.W.T. and Nunavut have avoided incorporating political partisanship in electoral process and candidates run as "independents". Their legislatures attempt to incorporate a more consensus form of decision making that is more in keeping with Aboriginal traditional values. This form of decision making is less adversarial and sometimes more complicated and time-consuming, resulting in no-decision at all! The territorial governments have delegated powers based upon the Constitution Act, (1982) which empowers them to make legislation regarding social welfare, education and health care. Compared to most countries, the Canadian government is highly de-centralized with provinces acting with considerable sovereignty and autonomy (Durst, 2007). Each territory, with total populations less than a small city, has its own legislation regarding Income Maintenance (Social Assistance or Welfare), Education (Elementary, Secondary, Post Secondary, Trades and Training) and Health (Acute and Long term Care, Public Health and so on). A host of policies and resulting programs with their miniature bureaucracies follow each legislative Act. The Acts and resulting programs are meant to be culturally sensitive or have unique provisions; however they are based on beliefs and assumptions of southern provincial programs. For example, each territory has its own Child Welfare Act providing programs in child protection, in-care services, treatments, adoption, foster homes and group homes. All the services and programs normally offered in the south are available in some form or another in the north. In proportion to their population, each of the three territories has huge and complicated bureaucracies. Each of the three territories is responsible for its own social work profession and its own social work education. Unfortunately, there is little or no coordination and collaboration across territories.

One important point must be emphasized. The overwhelming importance of Aboriginal and First Nations issues permeates all aspects of northern and Arctic education and service provision. The dark history of oppression and colonialism through child and social programs such as residential schools influences and shapes all aspects of northern society (Durst, 2010).

*Early Years of Social Work Development*²

In the early years of Canada's north, the federal government ignored the issues facing Aboriginal people and it was not until a novel by Farley Mowat, People of the Deer (1952), that the tragic plight and exploitation of Inuit people was exposed to southern Canadians. Also in an effort to establish Canadian sovereignty, the federal government increased its activity in the Arctic, which included the wretched relocation of entire communities (McGrath, 2008; Tester & Kulchyki, 1994). In the sixties, there was an effort to professionalize social services and southern social workers were recruited to provide social programs. Most of these professional social workers held graduate degrees (M.S.W.) and worked closely with local Aboriginal "social service workers" who had no social work education and some with limited formal education at all. The "white" social workers provided the back-up for the Aboriginal service workers who knew the community and lived the culture. In the seventies, the need to develop Aboriginal workers was recognized and in the N.W.T., the first training included in-service workshops and distant learning modules to be completed in the workers home communities. The N.W.T. developed a promotional video for social work development with the southern worker portraved as a robin (steady and slow) and the Aboriginal worker portrayed as an Arctic tern (skilful flyer).

² Much of this section is based upon the author's own experience in the Division of Staff Development, Department of Social Services, Government of N.W.T. in the 1970s.

During this time, competent social service workers were identified and sponsored to attend community colleges in the south to earn "Social Service Worker" diplomas. These two year programs generated numerous para-professionals but the courses had no serious Aboriginal content. However, among the graduates was a new sense of accomplishment and satisfaction in a diploma that was recognised nationally. There was something unique that happened that was not duplicated in the in-service programs. In one case, an Aboriginal student reported that she had to complete a research project that involved knocking on "white peoples' doors." The region was known to be quite racist and she was terrified but much to her delight, people were warm and friendly to this professional young woman. The experience developed a higher level of confidence.

It became obvious that the north needed its own college-based social work program that adhered to national standards. Some discussion included a two year diploma program that had a generic first year. In the second year, students could fan into specific studies such as social service, rehabilitation worker and youth worker. At Thebacha College in Fort Smith, social service programs were implemented with limited success. Students came from isolated communities and were expected to live in residence for long periods of time. The separation from family was extremely difficult, especially for young mothers. In addition, many arrived with poor academic skills and completion rates were low. These are key issues for all efforts in developing social work education in all regions of the north.

In the eastern Arctic, the regional government had linkages with social work programs implemented by southern institutions such as McGill University in Montreal and Wilfrid Laurier University in Waterloo. McGill offered a 30-credit Certificate in Northern Social Work Practice from 1982 until 1995, almost without interruption. This program was primarily conducted in Nunavik (northern Quebec) in the Inuktitut language, with significant engagement from the communities, particularly Elders (Thomson, Aitken, & Ives, 2008). After the creation of Nunavut in 1999, their territorial government established its own college, Nunavut Arctic College and its own programs. In efforts to make them accessible, many programs are offered on a rotating basis throughout Community Learning Centres. Currently, a two year social work diploma is offered in the Arctic community of Cambridge Bay (Nunavut Arctic College, 2011, web). The program incorporates "the principles and values of Inuit Qaujimajatuqangit so that students may achieve the fullest understanding and development of the whole person. Students also gain skills so that they can use this knowledge in their community environments" (Nunavut Arctic College, 2011, web). They plan to develop the program such that it facilitates a laddering into a BSW. in southern institutions. Interestingly, the college has been an active member and participant in the virtual university, University of the Arctic.

In Whitehorse, Yukon College implemented a 5 month certificate as a "Human Service Worker" and a 2 year "Social Work Diploma." The certificate was designed to ladder into the 2 year program and the 2 year program ladder into a 4 year BSW in institutions in southern Canada.

After developing their own "in-house" programs, both Yukon College and Aurora College opted for a partnership with the University of Regina. By offering Regina courses, students earned University of Regina credits and could earn a University degree all the while living, studying and working in the north. The BSW from Regina was the first university degree offered north of the 60th parallel in Canada.

Yukon College: Bachelor of Social Work Program³

The BSW program at Yukon College, located in Whitehorse, Yukon Territory, is now entering its 18th year, which is a significant accomplishment for a small, geographically isolated, northern Canadian institution (Yukon College, 2011, web).

Since the beginning, the Yukon College program has partnered with the University of Regina, in the prairie province of Saskatchewan to deliver the Bachelor of Social Work program. The partnership between the University of Regina and the college has been stable and enduring. Yukon College provides a full complement of first and second year general university studies; third and fourth year social work courses are credited through University of Regina, but are delivered by faculty employed by Yukon College. The Yukon BSW. is involved in the accreditation process that the university must follow with Canadian Association for Social Work Education (CASWE). The goals of the program are to provide students with the knowledge, values and skills necessary to practice social work in northern, rural and First Nations contexts. This BSW program was founded on the vision outlined following a Yukon-wide community consultation process in 1992. The goal was to create a program that helped northern people, especially Yukon First Nations people, to become professional social workers, to take a holistic and "wellness" approach, and to have course material and delivery styles that reflected the realities of northern practice (Senkpiel, 1997). The program seeks to educate students to be competent, ethical service providers who will think critically about social inequalities and structures that oppress people, and challenge them to think of how they can make changes. Since 1993 when the program was launched, they continue to strive for these goals. It is not a simple task, but it is one that they are deeply committed to realizing. Over time, there have been changes and improvements such as increasing standards for admission and ongoing curriculum review and development.

The University of Regina's Faculty of Social Work Mission Statement reads:

The social work program of education, research and community service is designed to prepare students for critical generalist social work practice with diverse peoples. Informed by the principles of social justice, the social work program encourages students to identify the needs of the disadvantaged, marginalized and oppressed; to develop the commitment, knowledge, values, attitudes, and skills required to confront structural inequalities; to address personal issues; and to empower individuals, families, and communities to realize their full potential. (University of Regina, 2011, web)

Yukon College's social work program follows this mission statement, but also pays heed to the original Yukon vision statement provided in 1993 by Yukon First Nation Elder, Roddy Blackjack, who instructed that the program must respect the "two cultures, side by side, together into the future" (Senkpiel, 1997. p.29). Hence, it is interesting that the program attempts to be bi-cultural in its orientation in a way that the social work graduates have knowledge and competencies in both the Aboriginal and mainstream cultures.

The mission statements have not been modified as the program wishes to maintain its commitment to Aboriginal people who currently comprise approximately 25% of Yukon's population (21% *Yukon* First Nations, 4% Aboriginal people from other parts of Canada). These numbers are in sharp contrast to the overall Canadian Aboriginal population of 4%.

³ This section has been taken from the Yukon College report for accreditation with the Canadian Association of Social Work Educators and was prepared by Janice Wiens.

The program has a required cultural immersion called "Cultural Camp" offered every other summer. This course provides an opportunity for students to leave the campus and explore modern but traditional lifestyle in First Nation communities by living and working in a First Nation environment. Traditional Elders and members of the community provide an intense, unique, and challenging experience for the students that might include spiritual and traditional stories, skinning a rabbit and catching fish with a net.

The faculty works to recruit students who reflect the demographics of Yukon. Their students are representative of its population in that they have a broad range of ages, and the First Nation and non-First Nation proportions are similar to its community. Enrolment in the Bachelor of Social Work program, when including both full and part-time students, has been relatively steady over the past six years with a rolling three-year average of between 35 and 40 students. The split between full and part-time is usually about 25 full and 12 part-time with some variance year to year.

As is true for most undergraduate social work programs, women consistently outnumber men at approximately 80/20 split. The average age, for all years, is over 35 years of age which is quite high when compared to southern social work programs. Part-time students (over 40 years of age) tend to be older than students who choose to attend on a full-time basis. This higher age is probably a reflection of family and work commitments faced by older students. Regardless, the student population in this northern program is quite mature.

There is the constant goal to increase the number of First Nation students entering the program for three basic reasons. First Nation social workers in Yukon do not make up 25% of the social work community and if the profession is to reflect our demographics there needs to be more First Nation social workers. Secondly, people with First Nations ancestry continue to be overrepresented as clients/recipients of social services; thus, increasing the number of First Nation social workers to work within this community is critical. Finally, the Yukon is in a unique political period with recent land settlements resulting in greater control by First Nation governments. In the social services field, there is a demand for professionally trained First Nation social workers to develop and deliver these social service programs.

First Nations organizations, governments and individuals (including First Nations students and alumni) help us attract and encourage new students to the program. Half of admission seats are reserved for First Nations applicants who meet admission requirements but are not successfully filled with Aboriginal applicants.

The activities connected to the program (such as Cultural Camp) and the curriculum are reflective of Yukon people's experience. Students are encouraged to engage in social justice events and projects within the community. The college is fortunate to have First Nations cultural advisors and counsellors who support students and also organize events that are welcoming of all students (feast days, specific cultural events and programming, and involvement in BSW selection processes).

Many of the students come from families where post-secondary education is foreign and in the case of the residential schools, it has been openly hostile to their culture. There are serious socioeconomic obstacles these students face and it is critical to find the support and resources they need to be successful.

As faculty in a small northern community, personal and professional conduct is highly scrutinized. The distinction between personal and professional life is different than in a major urban centers. Respect is earned. It is built on ethical conduct, competence, honesty,

availability, a sense of partnership, effort and other behaviour congruent with social work values. Faculty need the respect of our community for the program to be successful and their conduct influences how the larger community views our students and the program. If the community does not trust the students and faculty, on a personal and professional level, there will be an impact on the program's credibility and functioning. Faculty demonstrate respect to our students and promote respectful conduct within the class and beyond. The importance of professional conduct is discussed in course outlines, our academic policy and in every course.

Everyone's opinion and full involvement is valued and participation in class discussions is expected. As in traditional custom, classes occur within a circle setting and begin each class with a check-in and end each class with a closing circle/debrief where each student has the opportunity to contribute. Student contact time with students is likely greater than in some larger social work programs.

Since 1995 there have been 120 graduates from this program. There are, on a six-year average, seven BSW graduates per year. The number of BSW graduates per year has ranged from a low of five (2003, 2005) to a high of 12 (2006). Obviously, this program is quite small and has potential for expansion.

In the first seven graduating years (1995-2001) of the BSW program, a total of 13 of 55 (24%) graduates were of First Nations ancestry (four other First Nations students who began in the program also graduated, but from University of Regina). From 2002-2007, of the 42 graduates, only seven were of First Nations ancestry (17%) which does not represent the demographics of the Territory.

The education received by the 120 Bachelor of Social Work graduates has helped them to obtain employment in the north/Arctic. Of the 120, ninety-three (78%) graduates have remained in the Yukon. Ten are now retired or working in another field. Of the remaining 83 graduates, 62 (75%) are employed by the Yukon Government. The remaining 11 social workers are employed by First Nations governments and organizations, non-profit organizations or are self-employed. Graduates are employed in a wide range of child welfare, youth work, addictions, corrections, court and treatment services for those perpetrating violence as well as health settings, family support and counselling, social planning and policy development positions, to name a few.

Twenty-seven (22%) of BSW graduates left the Yukon to pursue employment opportunities, primarily in the western provinces and the two other northern Territories. Approximately one-third of these graduates were returning to their home community/province.

Of the 120 graduates, 19 (16%) are currently in the process of, or have completed graduate levels of education: 6 completed a MSW; 4 currently in a MSW.; 8 completed or other Masters level and one in Law.

This section has highlighted the strengths of a small, northern program that has limited resources and yet because of the cohesiveness of work, support of the professional community, and its relationship with the University of Regina, it has been committed to supporting rural social work education. It has been able to provide university-level professional education for its community students – a truly north of 60 partnership.

The program has its strengths in community resources, First Nations' focus and connections, and steady enrolment and graduation numbers. The student population is quite reflective of Yukon demographics. However, increasing numbers of male students as well as continued

efforts to encourage First Nations students into the program remains a priority. Increased funding would allow for further permanent faculty positions, but this financial decision rests with the territorial government rather than the college administration.

Recommendations focus primarily on continuing to act upon already identified issues, such as revitalizing a more formal advisory committee, reviewing admission strategies to target specific populations such as immigrants, and pressing for increased funding.

Northwest Territories: Certificate in Social Work

The program was first started in the 1980s and was located on the campus in Fort Smith. Since its inception there have been problems with low enrolments and poor student retention/completion. Many students were poorly prepared for academic study and not accustomed to living outside their home community. Many just left for home in their first year. After limited success, the program was moved to Hay River and later to Inuvik. The idea was to increase accessibility of the program by rotating the program to the regions within the N.W.T. It is now offered in Yellowknife, the largest community in the N.W.T.

At this time, Aurora College offers a social work diploma with general university studies and social work courses. It is meant to be equivalent to 2 years of full time study but students often take much longer. They may graduate with a Diploma in Social Work or a Certificate in Social Work (equivalent to 1 year) from the University of Regina. The courses are accredited by the University of Regina and graduates may apply to have their two years of credits applied toward the Bachelor of Social Work degree at the University of Regina or Yukon College (Aurora College, 2011).

The courses are taught with specific relevance to the Northwest Territories and its social issues, cultural groups, and delivery systems and resources. Although the overall certificate program comes from the south, its courses and the field practicum are planned to meet the educational needs of students who will be working in the North. Since the courses are university level, graduates have the opportunity to continue their studies towards a BSW. in southern programs. The manner in which the program is delivered is "geared to meet the needs and characteristics of adult, multi-cultural learners" (Aurora College, 2011) which is primarily Aboriginal/First Nations students.

Meeting the CASWE requirements, the social work program "educates social workers in a northern, generalist practice, preparing them to work with individuals, families, groups and communities. The program teaches students a wide range of helping and intervention skills, with a solid foundation in social work values and ethics. Students will learn to work as agents of social change in a variety of settings" (Aurora College, 2011).

Some students are poorly prepared both academically and socially for academic study. Some students have lived their entire lives in very small isolated Arctic communities and have never lived away from their family. In these small communities, their education has been limited by very small schools and educational resources. Some of these students have found the adjustment to the college difficult and some fail. For those students, the college offers "The Social Work Access Program". For one year, students who would like to work in the social work field are given academic skill development in preparation for their collegelevel studies. "In addition, opportunities for personal reflection and growth are considered integral to the preparation process" (Aurora College, 2011, Web). These courses include basic preparation courses such as English, Math, Personal Development, Computers, Social Work, Psychology and Sociology. The courses have an orientation and content relevant to the Arctic social work. After the access year, students may apply to enter the Social Work Diploma Program or other Human Service Programs that the college offers.

Concluding Comments

The two northern colleges offer quality social work programs based upon the curriculum from the University of Regina. Upon successful completion of their programs, the students receive credits leading towards a certificate or Bachelor Degree that is part of a broader social work program accredited by the Canadian Association of Social Work Educators (CASWE). The programs are accredited nationally and therefore, hold international standings. The BSW. is recognized for practice anywhere in the world. However, this places some restraints on the program and some restrictions such as its orientation to generalist practice with individuals, families, and groups and community development. Basically, it is a southern based program with urban orientations transferred north. This is not to exclude some localization of the program in social work knowledge, skills and perhaps values but all within the overall framework of the CASWE.

Because the programs are physically located in the north and have instructors who are northern social workers, these programs have an inherent northern relevancy unavailable in southern programs. However, it does not appear that a northern model of practice has been developed. There is little articulation of what northern social work means. There is no "northern theory of social work practice."

In a rare study of northern practice, Graham, Brownlee, Shier and Doucette (2008) have researched the question of how northern social workers have adapted and created their social work practice. They completed a qualitative study with 37 practicing northern social workers in the N.W.T. and northern Ontario. It is assumed that the workers received their professional development in southern based programs. The researchers reported that the workers found that "they are challenged to adapt the social work knowledge base they have to meet the needs presented in northern communities" (Graham, et al., 2008, p. 401). The workers found it necessary to adapt to the regional, community, cultural and individual contexts. They need to be very knowledgeable, about the region and flexible and creative in order to access limited resources. They need strong community development skills and to exercise cultural sensitivity. They need to be aware of how they present themselves as individuals in the community in order to establish credibility and respect. Relationships in the community are very important and can enhance or complicate the workers ability to practice, a concern expressed earlier in this article under the Yukon program. The researchers conclude the need for capacity development of knowledge and skills in social work practice in the northern setting. "This fact poses challenges to schools of social work, whose present curriculum fosters the person-in-environment approach in its generalist degree program" (Graham, et al., 2008, p. 404).

In their study, the participants "identified a number of areas related to theory and practice that they perceive as being inappropriate to working within northern communities (Graham, et al., 2008, p. 403). Unfortunately, the workers did not clearly identify the theories or practices that are inappropriate. The next step is to develop models incorporating a northern theory and a northern practice. First Nations University of Canada has a First Nations/ Aboriginal social work program that emphasizes their FN/Aboriginal orientation in all of its courses and practice. They are clear that they are not teaching social work from a bicultural orientation as Yukon College but reject so-called Euro/western orientations to teach exclusively from their FN/Aboriginal worldview. Clearly, this uni-cultural approach is different and unique in professional education in any discipline.

It is not clear what social work education is based upon: is there a social work foundation of theory and practice that is universal to all countries and cultures? These can include most concepts included in the mission statement of the University of Regina social work program: individual rights to safety and basic needs, social justice to the marginalized, and the need for social change. Or, are there fundamental differences and more than localized adaptation

of universal values, knowledge and skills? It appears that the academics as First Nations University feel there are fundamental differences while the northern colleges seem to adapt the foundation of social work to the northern/cultural context.

The next step in this process is to become more specific and start to identify the core knowledge, skills and values and examine the ways in which they differ from the south to the north and Aboriginal to non-Aboriginal. No other series of publications has done more to develop northern social work education than the seven edited volumes from the Centre for Northern Studies at Lakehead University. The latest was released in 2010, titled *Social Work and Aboriginal Peoples: Perspectives from Canada's Rural and Provincial Norths* (Brownlee, Neckoway, Delaney, & Durst, 2010). These series explore a broad range of issues in social work practice and education among Aboriginal peoples and northern/rural communities. The issues are complex and not mutually exclusive so a simple dividing up of issues into north and south or Aboriginal and non-Aboriginal is not realistic. There is the danger of reductionism and over simplification of knowledge, skills and values. However, the debate where or whether to adapt existing southern programs or reject and recreate social work based entirely on competing values is open for discussion.

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