

Current Assessment Structure and Description of Measures

When this plan was being developed, several overarching considerations went into its formulation. These considerations include: 1) the plan had to be integrated and to include different levels of evaluation in addition to outcomes; 2) the outcome component could not rely on an expensive and implausible research design as there are not adequate resources to support this sort of design; 3) outcome measures could not rely exclusively on self-report, observational methods, or standardized testing since each has its limit; thus, a multi-method approach was deemed to be desirable; 4) whenever possible, the Division should measure what is there, what exists in the program, rather than constructing or contriving, then measuring, the contrivance; and 5) if possible, the Division should use measures that already are a vital part of the program so that measurement and evaluation becomes an integral program component, as seamlessly as possible. We believe that the current plan does these five things. What follows is a description of the latest evaluation plan. In re-organizing the evaluation plan, we determined that there are three levels of evaluation pertinent to assessing effectiveness and using evidence to improve the program: 1) Impact; 2) Outcome; and 3) Process.

Impact

In examining impact, we have used the revised Alumni Survey to determine our long term effect on the practice community. We are using only the Alumni Survey and will evaluate these data every three years. Attempts will be made to contact graduates and encourage them to complete the electronic survey once every three years. Data from the Survey was used in the previous evaluation year as support for changes in the advanced generalist model. We believe that this level of evaluation answers the question, "Is the MSW Program effective in meeting the needs of the social work practice community?" The Survey will go back online in January of 2010. Information collected in three year increments will be used as either substantiation of the current program or evidence for more fundamental programmatic changes.

Outcome

The outcome component of our evaluation attempts to assess the degree to which students have achieved competence on each of our program objectives at the time of graduation. Because of the nature of the MSW Program, research design options were limited. Rather than relying on design strength, we chose to emphasize multi-method convergent analysis. We used four different assessment tools in the evaluation. We anticipated that by using this form of methodological triangulation, we would be able to adequately "point toward" curricular achievement. The first tool used is the Final POCO Evaluation which is explained below. An index of achievement, created by sections of course assignments, was constructed for each curriculum objective. Students must present data in raw form and establish percentages for each objective. Additionally, they are required to provide a self-rating for each program objective and to provide a rationale for their rating. We also use the Final Field Evaluation (Concentration Learning Plan SES) that is completed during a student's final semester in the MSW Program. The Field Evaluation has been revised to reflect the current curriculum objectives. Efforts have been made to increase the reliability and validity of the scoring on the Field Evaluation. Both the POCO Evaluation and the Final Field Evaluation

employ achievement standards in the form of percentages and means, respectively, for each program objective. As a fourth tool, we are using scores on the Simulated Licensure Exam although this instrument does not directly evaluate achievement in our curriculum. However, as an indirect measure, we believe that scores which suggest that students are able to pass the exam, may “point toward” achievement in our curriculum if there is a positive correlation with the first two measures.

Univariate analyses of data should identify specific curriculum objectives that were problematic (See description of POCO Evaluation and Final Field Evaluation below). Finally, a correlation matrix will be tabulated using the four quantitative measures per objective. These procedures should enable the faculty to identify the following: 1) whether program objectives have been met by a graduating cohort; 2) program objectives that need more attention; 3) program objectives that present disparities in triangulation; 4) possible weaknesses in the methodology; and 5) beginning evidence of criterion validity for each measure. Objectives that appear problematic can be evaluated in more depth during the following year using the flexibility of the POCO Evaluation and also “passed into” the process evaluation to further explore why these objective are problematic. At the end of each year, final tabulations and the raw data will be reviewed by the Director and the Evaluation Chair. Results will be passed to the Curriculum Committee for further assessment and to determine consequent modifications.

Process

The goal of the ongoing process evaluation of the curriculum is to determine and insure that the curriculum is being delivered in such a way that maximizes the potential for achievement of the curriculum program objectives. This is done through the use of numerous, different evaluation methods (most of which are qualitative). The focus of these methods is to insure continuous quality improvement by engaging in regular and diverse protocols and procedures that explore ways in which to improve instruction, develop faculty, insure student comportment, and assess the need for smaller changes in curriculum. Furthermore, the number of methods and their flexibility allow for the future exploration of curriculum objectives that seem to be problematic.

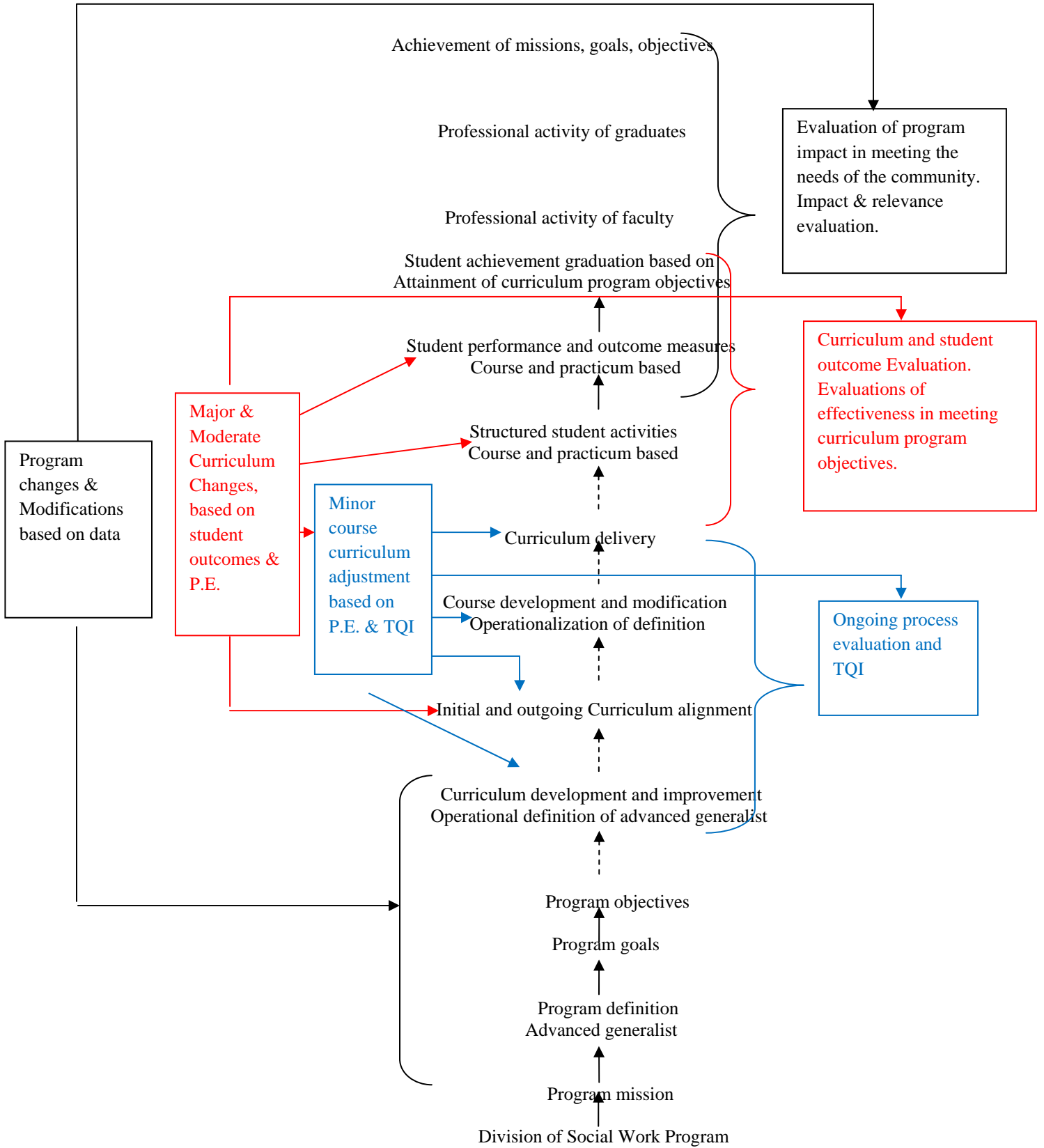
Feedback Loops

Unlike previous years, results of the data will be centralized and reviewed by the Curriculum Committee. Identification of problems in the outcome evaluation will lead first to an exploration of the POCO Map to examine the specific objectives, and secondly, to an exploration using one of our methods of process evaluation. The chart presented on the following page is a graphic depiction of this structure.

Feedback Deployment

Program Development Process

Evaluation Levels



In-depth Description of Data Collection Methods for the Three Levels of Evaluation

Impact Evaluation

Description of Alumni Survey

In 2007, the Division decided to survey all alumni in order to evaluate: 1) the continuing relevance of the MSW program objectives; 2) the degree to which practitioners assess their preparation to carry forth the objectives of the MSW Program; and 3) the degree to which the new program objectives are thought to be relevant. Modification of the Alumni Survey was based on the proposed modification of curriculum objectives in order to more adequately evaluate and reflect the *ad hoc* changes made in the curriculum and any functional “institutional drift” of the curriculum, based on the changing social work practice environment, changes at VSU, as well as feedback from students, field instructors, and other professional social workers. Most salient among these was a move away from rurality as a defining characteristic of the program and the inclusion of leadership. These changes were most noticeable in students’ concentration year. Before we formalized the changes in the curriculum, the faculty wanted to know what our alumni thought about the proposed changes. As a method of exploring the validity of the changes, the faculty piloted an alumni survey that reflected these new program objectives. There were over 100 items on the survey, and each was considered to be an element of one curriculum objective including those proposed. Each program objective had at least one item, and some of the concentration objectives had as many as 15 items. Alumni were asked to rate each item using a five point Likert-type scale. There were two dimensions per item: the degree to which participants believed that the MSW curriculum had prepared them on each item and the degree that they thought the item had relevance to their professional social work. We believe that competent and productive alumni are the litmus test for a program’s effectiveness. As we have developed the MSW Program over the past 14 years, both our presence in a historically rural region and the lack of social workers in the region have allowed us to maintain strong communication ties with alumni.

Alumni have provided regular feedback to us through their work as field instructors and as Advisory Board members. They also have been willing to maintain intermittent contact and feedback regarding their own professional development. Their feedback has been used to add and modify elements to our program to include the following: the addition of a course on groups, restructuring of elective courses, increased emphasis on leadership, and importantly, significant changes of the practice environment from one that has been largely rural, to one that incorporates rapidly developing communities and rapidly dwindling resources as well as the continuing importance of an Advanced Generalist perspective of the curriculum. Although faculty members track these data annually, we anticipate that major program changes that can be seen through patterns and trends, based on impact, will take 3 to 5 years to become apparent in the data.

Outcomes Evaluation (Measures Achievement of Curriculum Objectives)

Description of POCO Map

The POCO Map essentially is an extended grid displaying the relationship of every course outcome and its measure of achievement with all curriculum objectives. Its development has been described in depth in Standard 2, so a brief description should suffice. We have dissected all of our courses, employed course-based outcomes, and have assessed and aligned each course outcome based on its direct fit with a particular program objective. We have defined 19 program objectives. Fourteen are undertaken during the foundation year of the program and continued, with different outcomes, in the concentration year. We also have revised the concentration year objectives based on our own observations and support from alumni and students. We now have 5 concentration objectives that are added in the second year of the program. All course outcomes must be specific and contain course-related behaviors, skills, and knowledge stated as a standard of attainment. They then are evaluated using assignments or tests or sections of assignments or tests. Achievement of a course outcome that is based on the assignment is considered to be an indicator of achievement for the particular program objective to which it is linked. Because the course outcomes are considered to be operational elements of the overall program objectives, achievement on a constellation of course outcomes is taken as classroom evidence for achievement of the program objectives. Once established, course outcomes can be changed only with the approval of the Curriculum Committee. This requires that instructors present a compelling reason why a new or revised course outcome fits the overall objectives of the curriculum.

By aligning every course outcome under at least one program objective, along with disaggregated assignments and tests as discrete measures for each course outcome, we believe that we have created a map of our professional corpus. This map of the curriculum is referred to as the Program Objective Course Outcome Map or POCO Map, and there is a POCO Map for the foundation year (containing the first fourteen objectives) and one for the concentration year. The entire process of curriculum realignment and course revision has extended from December, 2007 until August, 2008. Each course syllabus now contains a course version of the POCO Map. Additionally, students and field instructors are provided with the comprehensive POCO Map. The POCO Map refers only to courses and practicum is not included.

Description of POCO Map Evaluation

The POCO Map Evaluation has replaced the portfolio as the major tool for evaluating the student's classroom-based achievement of program objectives. At the beginning of each academic year, faculty will select a group or all curriculum objectives which the faculty will evaluate at the end of the academic year. Subsequently, a sub-committee will select a number of course outcomes and related classroom assignments from the Concentration POCO Map (and possibly some from the Foundation POCO Map) which they believe represent each curriculum objective. These will be presented to the Curriculum Committee for approval of face validity. The Curriculum Committee will review selections to insure that the course outcomes appear to be vital, course-based elements of the program objective to which they are linked, and that the assignment or sections of the assignment appears to adequately operationalize the course outcome. At this point, a course outcome may be rejected or an assignment may be altered or substantially revised so that it is considered a more appropriate measure of the outcome. In this way, the selection process of the POCO Evaluation also serves to strengthen our courses and our measures. Any outcome that is vetoed will be replaced.

When this process has been completed, concentration students will be presented with a *Guide to the POCO Evaluation*. Students will not know until late fall of their concentration year, the specific course outcomes that will be used in the evaluation. Therefore, they will be required to save all assignments from their foundation and concentration years. This *Guide to the POCO Evaluation* is completed in late April, with students providing raw scores for each outcome measure, and then converting each score to a percentage for each measure. Finally, they will average their percentages for the outcomes that are grouped for each curriculum objective. The completed *Guide to the POCO Evaluation* will be submitted to faculty advisors as a graduation requirement. Data will be reviewed by a designated faculty member for completeness and percentage accuracy, and then data will be entered into a database that contains each course outcome percentage as well as the mean percentage for each curriculum objective. A minimal standard mean for each objective has been set at 80%. In the data analysis, curriculum objectives that demonstrate an average of below 80% or above 95% are flagged for further analysis by the Curriculum Committee. In this way, faculty members will attempt to identify program objectives that are either not being met or appear to be inflated. As stated above, students also are required to rate themselves on each curriculum objective. The faculty will use this method to check for congruency between the student's self-appraisal and the evidence that they provide.

This complex process of curriculum realignment and evaluation will be beneficial in several ways that are germane to outcome measurement. They are as follows:

- Program objectives now circumscribe the allegiance of all course knowledge and skills to the curriculum rather than to instructor preferences and biases.
- Students and faculty now have a visual graphic which reflects how each course operationalizes the program objectives using course outcomes.
- Students and faculty now can see how each program objective is operationalized and explicitly measured at the course level.
- Faculty and evaluators can assess the strengths and weaknesses of the curriculum delivery system based on face validity of course outcomes in relation to each objective.
- Specific program objectives can be assessed in terms of curricular completeness, based on the volume and relevance of course outcomes.
- Students are able to “see” and assess their own progress in meeting program objectives over time based on course outcomes and their scores for each outcome.
- Faculty and students can select a constellation of specific course outcomes that serve as indices of multi-course-related achievement toward each program objective.
- Faculty can assess course-based achievement of the program objectives at the time of graduation using these POCO Map indices as the basis for the POCO Evaluation.
- Aggregate cohort scores can be constructed annually on each program objective, using the POCO Evaluation form. This process will allow us to determine

strengths and weaknesses in achieving the 19 program objectives from year to year.

- These indices can be strengthened or revised from year to year using the POCO Map which allows for flexibility in either more intensive measurement of particular program objectives or more in-depth measurement of program objectives that are not being met.
- Selection of different course outcomes as index elements requires that course outcomes and their measures be re-evaluated to insure their continued relevance.
- Differential selection and measurement of curriculum objectives can be easily accomplished depending on the needs of the program evaluation.
- Program equivalency, in the form of POCO achievement can be easily documented using correlated samples t-tests on outcomes.

The Student Learning Plan

A process similar to development of the POCO Map was used to revise the Student Learning Plans and the Student Learning Plan Semester Evaluation Section (SES) that are a part of each semester's field practicum placements. As a result, the revised Student Learning Plans became more similar in nature to the POCO Maps, in that allegiance to learning in the field was directly connected to the curriculum program objectives, rather than the structure of the agency. Details of the revisions follow:

1. The Student Learning Plan was revised so that it directly utilized the newly developed 19 curriculum program objectives as the objectives of the practicum. In other words, practicum was viewed as reflecting an agency-based achievement of the program objectives rather than a modified version of the objectives.
2. All of the specific learning outcomes were re-evaluated based on their fit with the curriculum program objectives. If they did not fit, they were revised, added to, or deleted.
3. All learning outcomes were evaluated once again, not simply for their fit with a program objective, but for their developmental appropriateness to the foundation and concentration years, and also in consideration of the developmental differences that occur between the first and second semesters of each year.
4. Agency-based learning tasks were now seen as being in the service of the learning outcomes, rather than the other way around. In the past, both students and field instructors emphasized the learning task itself as the end result rather than as a means to the end (achievement of learning outcomes). Student achievement in the past was based primarily on how well students achieved the learning task. Although this was never intended to be the case, often the result was that students learned to function well within a particular agency, but they were not given the necessary learning opportunities to become effective advanced generalists. With the revised learning plans, the faculty insured that performance-based learning outcomes were the same for all students, regardless of the agency, and these outcomes were derived from program objectives rather than agency-based learning tasks. Agency-based learning tasks were now developed and negotiated within each agency, based on the utility of the learning tasks as vehicles for promoting the achievement of learning outcomes. This change shifted the focus of

the development of each Student Learning Plan from the selection of learning tasks as the primary goal, to the determination of how each learning outcome could be achieved through a specific agency task. Through this change, both students and field instructors must consider more directly and clearly how learning outcomes can be achieved within the agency structure.

5. Emphasis was given to the development of specific behavioral indicators for each learning outcome, based on what the learning outcome would “look like” if achieved with a particular agency-based learning task or assignment. Each field instructor, student, and liaison now is responsible for negotiating a behavioral indicator for each outcome based on the agency’s array of available learning tasks. Attention is given to establishing behavioral indicators for use as standards of achievement similar to those used in Goal Attainment Scaling. A 5-point Likert-type scale is used for this purpose with the mid-point being the base standard of achievement per outcome.

6. A training package was developed for faculty and field instructors on the use of the new Student Learning Plans for all practica as well as the Student Learning Plan SES. Initially, faculty members were trained on its use, and their feedback was incorporated into subsequent field instructor training. Field instructor training began in August of 2008.

7. The final Student Learning Plan SES was assessed by the Curriculum Committee for content validity of the learning outcomes as a reflection of what students who are graduating should be able to achieve, in practicum, at the time of graduation.

The result of these changes was a type of POCO Map that was applied to the field curriculum, with many of the same characteristics as the classroom-based POCO Maps. Allegiance to learning was connected directly to curriculum program objectives. The 14 foundation program objectives are operationalized with different learning outcomes in the concentration year rather than using a traditional, more of the same, approach. Learning outcomes are not negotiable, but their performance indicators are. In several places, performance outcomes used in field are the same as those in specific courses. An example of this can be seen in the development of a program evaluation proposal that is a course requirement for SOWK 7500, Advanced Research. Students must develop the proposal under the supervision of their classroom instructor, field liaison, and field instructor. The result is a program evaluation proposal that is evaluated in the classroom, but the proposal also is evaluated by the field instructor. Field instructors know better than classroom instructors whether the proposal fits the needs and bounds of the agency. Outcomes that are used both in the POCO Map and the Student Learning Plan SES can be used as a reliability check for the overall outcome evaluation and determine if there are incongruities in the way in which field instructors and course instructors perceive the outcome achievement. Finally, aligning the learning plan and its evaluation with curriculum program objectives allows for more direct convergent analyses with the POCO evaluation.

The entire faculty engaged in this process under the supervision of the Field Director. Many performance-based outcomes are different from course-based outcomes in that they are more complex and may involve several skills integrated into one outcome. The Final Field Evaluation (Concentration Learning Plan SES) is conducted during the final three weeks of students’ concentration practicum. The faculty is aware of multiple problems and issues associated with the use of a final practicum evaluation as an outcome measure. The variation in

agencies, field instructors, liaisons, and student commitment to the evaluation process poses many threats to the validity of the undertaking. Likewise, tension between maintaining rigorous agency allegiance to the program objectives and the need to maintain and grow “good enough” practicum agencies can attenuate these efforts. The faculty currently are examining ways in which liaisons may participate more directly in student observations which result in outcome ratings. It is our belief, however, that despite these issues, evaluation of student performance in the final semester of practicum must be a component of any outcome evaluation for a social work program. We expect problems to continue. However, the development of coherent Student Learning Plans and their evaluations, which measure the achievement of the objectives of the curriculum rather than the achievement of learning about a particular agency, is imperative.

The Simulated Licensure Examination

Because efforts to track the licensure status of graduates have not been helpful, we developed a simulation of the actual examination. Although the simulation is one third as long as the actual examination (50 out of 150 questions), questions were selected and examined by three independent raters as to face validity and congruence with all factors and their weights on the licensing exam. Despite these efforts, the licensing simulation does not represent our 19 program objectives and is not a measure of these objectives. However, we posit that the exam is an accurate representation of the examination that beginning social workers must pass in order to achieve the status of Licensed Master of Social Work (LMSW). We chose to use the licensing simulation as tertiary data that can be used to “point toward” program achievement, if our primary outcome data validate achievement.

Program Process Evaluation

There are numerous methods that are used regularly in this process. Evaluation of data varies from informal to formal, depending on the protocol. Records of the data are decentralized and are either in the possession of the Director or a relevant committee. What follows is a list of these procedures.

- Doctoral focus groups
- SSWAG surveys
- Ongoing review of syllabi and modifications (Curriculum Committee) TQI
- Transparency Tuesday (Curriculum Committee) TQI
- Review of Student Opinion of Instruction, SOI (course evaluations) (Director, Curriculum Committee) TQI
- Graduate Exit Focus Groups (Director) Process
- Monthly Curriculum Committee Meetings TQI
- Field Instructor Focus Groups (Director of Field Instruction) Process
- Peer Evaluations of Teaching (faculty) TQI
- Number of faculty successfully engaged in promotion/tenure process (faculty) Process
- Faculty sub-committee focus groups that synthesize and deploy conclusions from data above, then recommend to Curriculum Committee (curriculum committee) TQI

- Annual Evaluations of faculty (Director)
- Ongoing consultation with Social Work Advisory Committee TQI
- Foundation Field Evaluations (first year benchmarks)
- Ongoing GPA (semester benchmarks)
- *MSW Student Code of Conduct* and consequent staffings
- Admissions committee TQI
- Needs Assessment and feasibility evaluation for additional program components (Admissions Committee)
- Ongoing reviews of existing program records, done under auspices of Admissions Committee, Curriculum Committee and ad hoc committees created by the director
- Ad hoc assessments as needed (e.g., feasibility evaluation of an additional program component)

As suggested on the chart above, data obtained from these processes often are used in the “middle range of program development tasks”. They tend to serve five general purposes: 1) insure that the current program functions as planned; 2) to explore where changes are needed that are suggested in the outcome evaluations; 3) fine tune the curriculum or make minor changes based on point number two; 4) explore changes that are suggested by one of the other methods (see list directly above) employed at this level of evaluation; 5) make programmatic changes that will not substantially alter the curriculum. Although most of the processes are independent of one another, they are integrated by mapping them into the chart above. Rather than detail each process, it might be instructive to provide an example of points 4 and 5.

Description of the Admissions Committee, Needs Assessment, and Feasibility Evaluation

The Admissions Committee consists of four faculty members and the Director of Admissions. In addition to reviewing current applications, the Committee also reviews existing program records pertaining to the admission and retention of students. It was noted in March, 2009, that the number of students enrolled in the face to face (FTF) cohort has decreased over the last three years. A review of records suggested that there are fewer applications for the FTF program, and students are more difficult to retain. To further explore the problem, the Admissions Committee, with the guidance of the Admissions Director and the consultation of Dr. Rich Vodde, surveyed Concentration Students from 2008-2009 cohort regarding program preferences. Results suggest that students who live further than 50 miles from Valdosta continue overwhelmingly to endorse the web, weekend program. However, student responses within the 50 mile radius are mixed as to whether they prefer the existing FTF structure or they prefer a version of the web program that might involve meeting FTF one weeknight per week. Given the small sample and the rapidity of the survey, results are inconclusive. However, the results provided sufficient evidence for the Admissions Committee to submit a proposal to the university to request Strategic Funding to support implementation of a Needs Assessment to address the issue of increasing student retention and enrollment in the most effective way. The second part of the proposal involves development of the most effective way of program expansion which could involve either a modification of the FTF component or the addition of a third cohort. The Division has not yet received affirmation as to whether Strategic Funds will be

available, but even if funding is not available, the Division will pursue this type of empirically-driven program growth.