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To cite this article: Thomas Packard DSW & Michael J. Austin (2009) Using a Comprehensive Case-Based Examination To Evaluate and Integrate Student Learning in Social Work Administration, *Journal of Teaching in Social Work*, 29:2, 204-215, DOI: [10.1080/08841230802240886](https://doi.org/10.1080/08841230802240886)

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/08841230802240886>



Published online: 03 Apr 2009.



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Using a Comprehensive Case-Based Examination To Evaluate and Integrate Student Learning in Social Work Administration

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While the case method has been used in teaching social work practice for many years, its use as an evaluation tool is less common. This analysis describes the use of the case method in a comprehensive examination for MSW students in an Administration concentration. After a brief review of the issues related to student outcome assessment and the curriculum of the Administration concentration, a case debriefing framework is described, along with examples of student responses. The analysis concludes with a discussion of issues and implications for future research.

KEYWORDS *Administrative cases, examination, educational outcomes, administration concentration*

The use of cases has a long history in social work education (Rivas & Hull, 2004) and in other fields including business, law, and medicine (Lynn, 1999). However, this literature describes the use of cases primarily in the context of teaching and learning and not as part of a learning evaluation system. This paper describes the use of management cases within the structure of a comprehensive examination located at the end of a two-year MSW program for graduate students specializing in administrative practice.

The purposes of this comprehensive case-based examination are: 1) to assess student mastery of the advanced concentration in administration, 2) to

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serve as an integrative mechanism for student learning at the end of the MSW program, and 3) to demonstrate student readiness for social work practice in administration.

This case-based examination is built upon a social work curriculum that uses teaching cases in social work practice courses. After a brief review of the relevant literature on assessing educational outcomes, a description of the administration curriculum provides a framework for the case-based examination process. The analysis concludes with lessons learned and implications for future research.

ASSESSING STUDENT OUTCOMES

Effectively assessing the outcomes of graduate social work education, and especially the need for relevant outcome measures, has been a challenge for decades (Gambrill, 2002; Garcia & Floyd, 2002; Holden, Meenaghan, Anastas & Metry, 2002; Holden, Barker, Meenaghan & Rosenberg, 1999; Hull, Mather, Christopherson & Young, 1994). Garcia and Floyd (2002) found that identifying and agreeing on assessment measures can be difficult. In assessing university self study documents prepared by social work programs accredited by the Council of Social Work Education, they found measures that ranged from alumni surveys (used by 83% of those programs) to faculty evaluation reports (used by 11%). The category of capstone tests and assignments (the category used to classify the case exam approach reported here) was used by 22% of those programs. In contrast, Hull et al. (1994) reported that 44% of MSW programs in their sample used "Exit or Competency Examinations." In a 1989 survey of 64 MSW programs, Kameoka and Lister (1991) found that only 19 programs (30%) used outcome assessments beyond course grades, and that of these, 6 used a written comprehensive exam.

One approach to assessing educational outcomes is the use of administrative *competencies* (Menefee, 2009; Wimpfheimer, 2004). Course grades are a composite measure of competencies in individual courses, and internship evaluations are structured around competencies related to demonstrated knowledge, skills, and values. The comprehensive exam addresses competence at a broader level by using acquired knowledge from all courses as well as analytical, assessment, planning, and problem solving skills applied to a broad range of organizational issues.

The comprehensive case-based examination is one of several measures of program outcomes used to assess individual student competence and qualifications to receive the MSW degree. Other measures, such as alumni surveys, provide feedback for program and curriculum improvement. The focus in this analysis is on the use of the comprehensive case-based exam as a tool to assess the student's administrative competence.

THE COMPONENTS OF THE ADMINISTRATION CONCENTRATION

This case study on the use of comprehensive examinations focuses on the MSW Administration concentration at San Diego State University. Detail on this concentration is available from the senior author and in Roberts-DeGennaro and Packard (2002).

The multiple measures of student competence include a qualifying examination completed at the end of the generalist first year, fieldwork evaluations, the comprehensive exam at the end of the second year, and post-graduation surveys (alumni and employer). As an alternative to the comprehensive exam, a student may elect to complete a thesis that emphasizes more program evaluation skills than administrative knowledge and skills.

Case-based learning is an important part of the Administration courses. Two different types of cases are used. In the fall semester, essentially single-issue cases are used. These address core management functions and processes including program design, information systems, human resource management, and financial management. The spring semester course covers subjects including strategic management and planning, leadership, supervision, and organizational change. Cases in the spring include a range of organizational issues that require more comprehensive analysis and interventions. For example, in the spring, a single case may include issues such as planning, marketing, cost analysis, quality, leadership, and quality of working life. The format and scope of the spring cases are the same as those used in the comprehensive case-based exam.

For any class session where a case is assigned, students are expected to analyze the case in advance of the class discussion by using a case assessment tool to help identify various issues (see Table 1). This is the administrative equivalent of a clinical assessment tool used in direct practice. Students are told that not every item on the list of possible factors is relevant to a given case. Part of assessing the contributions of students to the class discussion is the extent to which they have identified key issues. They are taught, however, that if there are financial issues related to agency survival and ethical issues related to professional behavior and the use of resources in the case, these should be noted. Financial issues include a significant budget deficit, the impending termination of major grants or contracts, and large unexpected expenditures. Ethical issues include accounting irregularities, an executive who is deliberately contravening directives from the agency board, staff theft of agency equipment, and staff misbehavior with clients. When analyzing a case, students are instructed to take the role of the administrator (usually the agency director) or the role of a consultant who has been hired by the agency to provide an assessment and to make recommendations. If students think that essential information is missing, they are asked to specify their assumptions and then proceed based on the assumptions.

TABLE 1 Case Assessment: Factors to Consider

Organizational Environment and Leadership

1. The environment: recent changes, stakeholder relations, adaptations being made or missed
 2. Leadership: vision, leadership style, motivation, organization culture, conflict management
 3. Ethics: client issues (e.g., staff competence & credentials, boundary issues, conflict of interest), agency and staff issues (e.g., fraud, misconduct)
-

Planning and Organization Design

4. Planning: mission, strategy, goals & objectives, target populations & needs, client relations
 5. Structure: reporting relationships, roles, resource allocation, coordination & communication
-

Program Design and Evaluation

6. Program Design: service delivery technologies appropriate to client needs, methods based on theory & research, methods are effective
 7. Program Evaluation: effectiveness & efficiency of program technologies, outcome measurement, formal & informal methods, use of data
-

Financial and Information Systems

8. Information Systems: computer usage, client and service data (demographics, outputs, outcomes) collected and used
 9. Financial Management: program budgets & costs, cost benefit/effectiveness, accounting controls, actual income vs. budget & expenditures
-

Human Resources Systems

10. Human Resource Management: staff qualifications, performance evaluation, recruitment & training, supervision
 11. Quality of Working Life: pay & benefits, working conditions, autonomy, growth opportunities, employee rights & due process
 12. Diversity: valuing diversity, staff-client demographics, policies, discrimination
-

NOTE: In identifying issues relevant in a particular case, it is important to note that not all items will need attention and there may also be issues that are not listed here.

Source: School of Social Work, San Diego State University.

Students are expected to share their assessments (in small group or full class discussions) and develop responses to the following debriefing questions: 1) what are the key issues in the case? 2) what change goals need to be developed to address each issue? 3) what are the intervention plans (using the application of administrative theories, principles, and techniques)? and 4) how will the interventions be assessed? This set of questions is used in both classroom-based case analysis and the comprehensive case-based exam.

CASE DEBRIEFING

The questions in the debriefing framework are based on a strategic management perspective that is defined as a process of identifying strategic issues and developing a plan for addressing them (Austin, Brody, & Packard,

2009). Underlying this approach is the notion of strategic *thinking*. While the term “strategic” is often associated with agency-wide strategic planning, the application of strategic thinking focuses on a realistic organizational situation that is complex and has major consequences (e.g. funding, environmental responsiveness, leadership, and organization design). The application of the strategic management approach to case analysis involves a comprehensive assessment of a situation by focusing on how issues should be addressed.

Applying the concepts of strategic management to case-based learning provides students with insights about how to apply theories and principles to multi-issue organizational situations. When problematic situations arise in an organization, they often have several dimensions or layers. For example, the implementation of a new client information system could also involve the impact of a manager’s leadership style on subordinates, leading to the need to intervene using conflict management skills or organizational redesign skills to modify the organization’s culture. Case-based learning provides students with the opportunity to explore different ways to deal with such a situation from several different perspectives.

Each of the steps in the strategic management debriefing framework is described below. They are designed to help students think strategically, integrate disparate issues and themes into their analysis, develop alternative perspectives that can lead to more effective interventions, and integrate divergent views emerging from class discussion.

Step 1: Issue identification

The identification of issues in a case is the first step to defining the conditions that need attention. The most important issues are not always obvious, especially in complex cases. It is essential that key issues are identified in order address one or more problems in the case rather than simply specifying symptoms or conditions.

Similar issues emerge frequently in the course of using cases in classroom discussions and in the comprehensive exam. For example, organizational problems are often affected by agency leadership. When using contingency theory, students can see how the leadership style of the agency director may be incompatible with the characteristics of staff and/or the culture of the agency including the use of “telling” behaviors when “participating” or “delegating” behaviors would be more appropriate (Hersey, Blanchard, & Johnson, 2001). Students may also see a style mismatch in a case in which a manager uses Likert’s (1967) Exploitative Authoritative style with competent, committed workers, when Consultative or Participative styles would be more effective. Similarly, when using the Leadership Grid concepts of Blake & McCanse (1991), a leader may be seen as ineffective when displaying “authority-obedience”, “country club

management”, or “impoverished management” behaviors at times when “team management” is warranted.

In recent years, the weaknesses in agency information systems (ISs) provide an opportunity to feature such concepts as outcome measurement, logic models, and program design related to evidence-based practice. Other areas of management practice that appear in cases include financial management (often budget deficits, the impending termination of grants or contracts, or an inadequate fund development plan) and strategic management (e.g., inadequate adaptation to changing conditions in the agency’s environment, a lack of coherent strategic direction as a result of a nonexistent, inadequate, or unused strategic plan).

Step 2: Goal Setting

After issues have been identified and analyzed, it is necessary to specify change goals that describe a future condition in which the problems are addressed and organizational functioning is improved. Change goals need to be constructed in the form of outcomes rather than as intervention processes. For example, a goal could be: “The agency will operate with an organizational culture and climate that fully values diversity and ensures the delivery of culturally responsive services.” This goal focuses on the desired outcomes rather than on the process objectives such as: “The agency will conduct mandatory diversity training for all employees”. If a goal is stated in terms of outcomes, it can provide a foundation for developing creative intervention activities.

Step 3: Intervention Plan

In this phase, change or intervention activities are developed for each goal that, in turn, has been linked to an identified issue. The intervention plan needs to include specific and relevant applications of effective management and leadership practices. For example, students may recommend that executives participate in a leadership development process, perhaps including off-site training and 360-degree feedback in order to enable them to use more appropriate leadership styles. To replace ineffective leadership styles, students often suggest the use of different leadership styles such as Transformational Leadership (Bass, 1998).

To address problems related to management systems such as financial management and information systems, practice principles related to the design of management systems can be important interventions. For example, students can suggest that an agency move to an outcomes-based IS by using: 1) a program design process, 2) measurement tools, 3) a specific IS design process, or 4) a comprehensive program evaluation system.

When a financial management issue is present in a case, students can explore the application of the following financial management techniques: 1) responsibility centers, 2) financial analysis ratios, 3) cost analysis, 4) internal control systems, 5) budget balancing techniques related to cutback management, and/or 6) fund development. Financial problems are often rooted in issues of strategy and therefore the implementation of a comprehensive strategic planning process is often another way to address one or more problems.

Another important aspect of the intervention strategy is the use of planned organizational change principles (Proehl, 2001). Students need to be explicit about their plans to implement organizational interventions. If, for example, a student proposes that the agency in the case needs to develop an information system (to document service inputs, throughputs, outputs, and outcomes), the student needs to describe not only how to design such an information system but also how to support it with a planned change process. The process needs to ensure that all involved staff recognize the need for the change and reflect a systematic plan to implement the change (e.g., the use of change agents, an organizational change steering committee, implementation task groups, etc). Students are expected to identify a technique (e.g., team building, total quality management) as well as describe its application, demonstrate substantive knowledge of the technique, and identify situations for its appropriate use. The appropriate use of administrative theories, concepts, and principles suggests that the student can not only address the case problems but also demonstrate how to apply the conceptual knowledge appropriately when other problems emerge in agency practice.

Step 4: Evaluation of the Intervention Plan

The final step of this process involves assessing the extent to which the interventions have addressed the issues identified in Step 1. Developing methods to assess goals and their outcomes can surface weaknesses in the framing of the goals as well as inadequate linkages between the goals and the interventions. The evaluation step provides the feedback loop needed to see if the identified issues have been adequately addressed.

To evaluate the intervention, students are expected to describe a systematic process of gathering data related to the extent to which the issues have been adequately addressed and the goals have been accomplished. Simple pre-post test designs are the most common within the context of action research. Employee and stakeholder surveys, interviews, or focus groups can be used to identify changes in satisfaction, climate, and morale. In addition, 360-degree feedback for executives can be used to assess progress regarding leadership development. Management and fiscal audits can be used to assess changes in management processes and financial status.

The techniques of impact or outcome assessment can also be used to monitor progress on goals and objectives (e.g., management by objectives, goal attainment scaling, cost effectiveness analysis, cost savings analysis, and client record reviews).

THE COMPREHENSIVE EXAM PROCESS

By using the four steps in the strategic management debriefing framework to analyze cases in the context of classroom discussions, students gain practice experience for taking the comprehensive case-based exam. For example, they can learn from other students about different ways of identifying issues, setting change goals, developing administrative intervention strategies, and planning for the evaluation of interventions.

When analyzing cases in class, students are encouraged to develop a matrix with the four strategic management questions from the debriefing framework on one axis and each of their three or four identified issues on the other axis, in order to insure that they adequately address each element and the connections among them. Students are encouraged to use this matrix as a worksheet when preparing the presentation of their responses, both in class and during the exam.

Students are encouraged to assess their responses to the four debriefing questions by using the criteria developed for assessing the comprehensive exam (see Table 2). It is important for students to address each criterion in the analysis because the readers of the exam do not make assumptions about what the student knows or means if it is not written in the exam. Four hours are provided for students to complete the examination by using assigned computers (with Internet connections disabled), and no other materials are allowed.

Each exam is read anonymously by two macro practice faculty members who are familiar with the case and use the criteria noted in Table 2. Students are informed that there are no “right” answers to the multi-issue case situation. In their case analysis they need to identify and analyze the top three or four issues (including financial or ethical issues, if present), specify a set of goals, describe several intervention strategies, and propose methods to evaluate the interventions. Students are expected to draw upon and explicate their knowledge of administrative theories, concepts, and practice principles learned in the course on organizational theory, the macro practice course, the two administration practice courses, and the advanced evaluation research course. Practice insights and wisdom acquired elsewhere (e.g., other MSW courses, the internship, prior employment, electives in other departments, and even undergraduate coursework) can be used by students as well.

Using a five-point Likert-type scale ranging from “outstanding” to “poor” on each of the ten factors in Table 2, two faculty raters score the

TABLE 2 Criteria for Scoring the Exams**Assessment**

1. Major issues are clearly identified and any relationships among them are shown; other key organizational factors (e.g., relevant strengths or weaknesses of the organization or its members) are identified.
2. Assessment of each issue clearly shows its relevance and how it contributes to the problem or its solution.
3. Assessment elements are supported by reference to theories, principles or research (e.g. theories of management, accepted principles of effective administrative behavior).

Goals

4. Specific prioritized change goals are listed and related to identified issues and assessment factors.
5. Rationales for the choice of each goal are articulated, based on assessment factors.

Intervention Plan

6. Strategies and tactics are adequately described and address identified goals. The overall plan is comprehensive, based on identified goals. A strategy for evaluating the intervention plan is included.
7. Clear rationales are provided for each strategy or tactic, indicating how each will aid goal achievement. Key relationships between the different strategies and tactics are noted.
8. The plan is supported by administrative principles, concepts, or theories, i.e., references

Evaluation Procedures.

9. Evaluation elements and measures to assess the effects of the intervention are clearly delineated and related to identified goals and issues.
10. Clear procedures are provided for implementing each evaluation element, indicating how each will measure the extent of goal accomplishment.

Source: School of Social Work, San Diego State University.

exam. Scores of less than 25 by both raters results in a failure. If the two raters disagree, a third rater serves as a tiebreaker. Students with failing scores may follow a procedure to address weaknesses and retake the exam.

While detailed data are not maintained on the annual cohorts of exam results, there are some common themes related to both strong and weak performance. Strong performance includes the identification of key issues, the development of appropriate change goals, the recommendation of viable interventions, and the use of appropriate evaluation strategies. Weak performance often reflects limited application of relevant theory and inadequate explanations of specific evaluation techniques for assessing goal accomplishment.

AN EXAMPLE

In 2006, thirteen Administration students completed a comprehensive case-based examination that featured a statewide, not-for-profit residential foster family agency that was experiencing significant challenges in terms of top management transitions, program growth, and budgetary issues. In

analyzing this case and proposing a change plan, the highest rated exams were seen as thorough in their analysis that used theory and administrative principles in issue identification and intervention strategy development. All these responses identified financial management, leadership, and program design as key issues; and one highly rated exam also addressed organization design issues.

The lowest rated exams usually identified key issues but failed to frame the goals in the form of outcomes, lacked details including the application of intervention strategies, and provided limited understanding of the evaluation process related to the proposed intervention. Students with low scoring exams focused more narrowly on strategies such as the communication of vision, mission, and goals to staff. In contrast, students with high scoring exams framed goals more fully by taking into account the alignment of organizational structure, leadership, and program models.

Highly rated responses referred explicitly to a planned change process (e.g., Proehl, 2001) and suggested detailed applications of techniques (e.g. cutback management, financial forecasting, cost effectiveness analysis, marketing, performance budgeting, needs assessment, asset mapping, strategic planning, and logic models). Low rated responses included some of these concepts and principles but lacked detail, and in two cases did not correctly apply theories from the courses.

ISSUES AND IMPLICATIONS

One issue regarding the case-based exam that needs ongoing attention relates to the rating procedures and the need for better interrater reliability. While faculty raters have a worksheet of possible responses, students are encouraged to creatively frame responses in a variety of ways and therefore there are no “correct” answers. Furthermore, the rating scale lacks individualized behavioral or descriptive anchors for each level of the five point scale. After exams are scored, faculty members review the responses of each student and often find that the ratings on each item are the same or vary by only one point. Comparing the rating each year provides faculty with the opportunity to clarify the norms guiding their ratings. One safeguard used is the third rater for cases in which one faculty rates an exam as “Fail” and the other rates it as “Pass”.

Another limitation of the exam is that it only allows the student to describe what he or she *might* or *intends to* do. It cannot adequately reflect how the student would actually function as an administrator in the case situation. As a result, a more comprehensive evaluation of student abilities is captured by multiple assessments (e.g. internship evaluations by field instructors, individual course assignments and course grades, and the multiple-choice qualifying examination at the end of the first year).

As noted earlier, students are required to either take a comprehensive examination or complete a thesis to meet the graduation requirement. The thesis and the exam assess different competencies: the thesis focuses on research and writing skills, and the exam focuses on organizational assessment, problem solving, and intervention planning. On the other hand, they both address analytical abilities and require advanced social work administration knowledge, which are essential for administrators. In order to balance the differences between a thesis and a case-based exam, students who do not complete a thesis are required to take an advanced research course focusing on research methods and program evaluation, and all administration students have an opportunity for case-based learning in two courses.

There are several implications for future research and experimentation in other universities. First, the validity of the exam needs further assessment by comparing exam results with other ratings of student competence (criterion-related validity), the inclusion of other outcome measures from elsewhere in the program (concurrent validity); and comparing exam results with subsequent measures of performance in the graduates' first administrative job (predictive validity).

Regarding reliability, there is a need to define more precisely the anchors for each of the ten criteria. However, even with more precise anchors, raters still need to account for the multiple and equally effective ways that students address complex cases. Also, since approximately ten students complete this case-based exam each year, more longitudinal studies of larger student cohorts are needed for more statistical analysis. Finally, gathering specific data on the learning value of the exam as part of MSW program may identify ways of improving the student outcome evaluations.

These limitations and the complexities of measuring administrative competence illustrate the challenges ahead. Much more dialogue is needed among macro practice faculty in order to share promising practices, different ways of incorporating feedback from alumni and employing agencies, and curricula assessment mechanisms. Macro practice faculty share the ultimate goal of preparing competent social work administrators who can effectively lead and manage agencies in the coming years.

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