

COMMENTARY

Social workers and community planners in the U.S.: Connecting in the academy and in the field

Elizabeth Shay^{1*} Maureen MacNamara²¹ Department of Geography and Planning, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC 28608, USA² Department of Social Work, Beaver College of Health Sciences, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC 28608, USA

Correspondence to: Elizabeth Shay, Department of Geography and Planning, Appalachian State University, Boone, NC 28608, USA;
E-mail: shayed@appstate.edu

Received: September 21, 2024;**Accepted:** December 14, 2024;**Published:** December 19, 2024.

Citation: Shay E, MacNamara M. Social workers and community planners in the U.S.: Connecting in the academy and in the field. *Soc Work Soc Welf*, 2024, 5(1): 302-306.
<https://doi.org/10.25082/SWSW.2024.01.001>

Copyright: © 2024 Elizabeth Shay et al. This is an open access article distributed under the terms of the [Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/), which permits all noncommercial use, distribution, and reproduction in any medium, provided the original author and source are credited.



Abstract: The professions of social work and regional planning, as practiced in the U.S., have overlapping and intertwining professional interests and shared goals. And yet, there are few examples of U.S. academic programs formally linking students preparing for careers in social work and planning. These two service-oriented fields use different tools and strategies, but have common aspirations to promote healthy, lively, and just communities. In particular, professional planners and community practice social workers in the U.S. cross paths relatively infrequently and may fail to recognize their own shared interests in domains such as dignified affordable housing, healthy safe environments, transportation equity, and more. We argue for greater exposure to and integration of the work of students and practitioners in these two professions.

Keywords: community practice social work, community and regional planning, inter-professional education

1 Introduction

Writing in *Social Work and Social Welfare* a decade after the start of the Great Recession, editor-in-chief Mucci [1] called for “a new perspective that focuses on the person and its network of relationships rather than the types of services they need, adopting a logic of social inclusion and cohesion, with a view to building long-term strategies with a clear, transparent and concrete definition of strategic objectives.” Mucci noted, further, that a more multidisciplinary perspective can expand the extant conceptual framework and objectives of welfare “from a policy of assistance and acceptance of discomfort, to a policy for individual and collective well-being” and activate “reciprocal practices that simultaneously produce social value and economic value.” In this fertile ground, social workers may find themselves working alongside, or even collaboratively with community and regional planners.

2 Two complementary-but disconnected-professions

Despite overlapping and intertwining professional interests and shared goals of supporting safe, healthy communities, we identified few examples of U.S. academic programs formally linking aspiring social workers with community planners-in-training. Both professions draw the bulk of their practitioners from professional masters’ programs; both are service-oriented fields governed by codes of ethics and aspirations to promote better conditions for more people, with particular attention to vulnerable, minoritized, or marginalized populations. And yet trained planners and social workers (specifically, community and organizational practice social workers) cross paths relatively infrequently and may fail to recognize their own shared interests in domains such as dignified affordable housing, healthy safe environments, transportation equity, food security, *etc.*

Our informal but systematic scan of U.S. universities and colleges (using keywords of ‘social work’ and ‘planning’ to search university programs of study) turned up only a dozen institutions that have explicitly linked or coordinated social work and planning, and half of these could not be confirmed through personal contact with directors of such programs. Our conversations with scholars who manage several of these programs suggest that despite clear common goals for serving communities and households through planning and social work practice, the institutional structure and processes to link them are weak or absent. Barriers include both mundane logistics (programmatic requirements for courses and credits, compatible calendars and bell schedules,

physical space to house students and faculty, support staff) and more daunting roadblocks tied to institutional goals and profession-specific standards that inform curriculum and requirements for applied experience such as internships or community research. Our very small sample of six interviews did not support an empirical paper, but it provoked deep thought, and motivated this commentary.

3 Practice-driven and public-serving professions

How do these two practice-based professional communities organize themselves, and how might they collaborate across disciplinary boundaries? Wenger and Wenger [2] described ‘communities of practice’ as “formed by people who engage in a process of collective learning in a shared domain of human endeavor: a tribe learning to survive, a band of artists seeking new forms of expression, a group of engineers working on similar problems, a clique of pupils defining their identity in the school, a network of surgeons exploring novel techniques, a gathering of first-time managers helping each other cope.” Such communities, whether intentional or not, involve people working in the same domain (shared interests); functioning as a community (joint activities, information-sharing, relationships); and engaging in a shared identifiable practice. Nisbet et al. [3] call for opportunities for interprofessional learning before students graduate and qualify to practice, to promote the collaborative client-centered teamwork essential to safety and quality of service, with qualitative and quantitative assessments of both changed attitudes and new knowledge gained. Payler et al. [4] describe a conceptual framework for evaluating novel interprofessional post-graduation pedagogy that mixes professionals from education, health, and social work, drawing from situated learning theory and activity theory, among others. The power and potential of urban and regional planning, public health, and social work to synergistically support strong neighborhoods and promote community change is rooted in their shared commitment to place-based context-specific work [5–7], but tempered by recognized challenges of cross-disciplinary practice.

Planning and community practice social work are service-driven professions where practitioners interact with individuals, households, community organizations, and local governments. In the U.S., these are seen as separate and distinct professions, with training and practice occurring in different domains. Social work is linked most often with allied health sciences, while planning programs may be housed with urban affairs or public policy, in design schools (*e.g.*, architecture, landscape architecture), or with allied liberal arts disciplines such as geography. Both social work and planning have professional certification for post-graduate practitioners, a code of ethics, and other trappings of practice-based professions. For social workers, certification requires successful completion of an academic curriculum from an accredited institution, an approved internship, and a qualifying exam. Certifications from several different organizations address a variety of subfields and require different levels of academic preparation (*e.g.*, Association of Social Work Boards: <https://www.aswb.org/>; National Association of Social Workers credentials: <https://www.socialworkers.org/Careers/Credentials-Certifications/Apply-for-NASW-Social-Work-Credentials>). For planners, certification involves qualifying to sit for-and passing-an exam after educational and professional work thresholds are met, followed by continuing professional training to maintain certification (American Institute of Certified Planners: <https://www.planning.org/aicp/>); other credentials cover specialized fields.

Academic training for social workers prepares students to work at several different levels, as described by Tropman [8]. Community practice social work deals with groups, organizations, and institutions. It is community and organizational social workers whose professional domain has the greatest potential overlap, as yet unrealized, with community and regional planners, who are most likely to be found working in municipal (or, less commonly, county or regional) governments or agencies, and developing strategies and programs that address community goals and priorities.

What are the tools of these two professions? Community and regional planners are trained to use quantitative and spatial tools (*e.g.*, maps, spreadsheets, R, GIS, and more) to understand community conditions, to develop and apply land use controls (*e.g.*, ordinances, plans), to use best practices in community engagement and communication, and to interact with a variety of partners and stakeholders for creative design and place-making. Planners should understand how local government and planning processes impact individuals, households, and neighborhoods, and incorporate that understanding into community-scale solutions. Community practice social workers likewise work at the community level, while assessing the circumstances and needs of households and individuals.

Community practice social workers and community and regional planners typically train in different academic units and apply their training and knowledge with different language and tools. But they share the goal of understanding how groups of people and organizations function and

promoting conditions for healthier and more just communities. What adjustments, or innovations, in academic training may bridge this gap to unlock the natural synergy of these two professions? Planning is taught as a community-embedded process that typically meets individuals (residents, business owners, other stakeholders) in public fora, where planning professionals act to translate community goals and priorities into local government policies and actions. While they may hear from and interact with individuals, the process involves groups (*e.g.*, neighborhoods, advocacy or interest groups, commercial and business players). Community practice social workers are likely to have received some academic training in person-to-person clinical models of service, but they too focus on groups and organizations. How might these two professions more productively interact?

4 Interprofessional education across sectors

Interprofessional education (IPE) is often celebrated by U.S. academic institutions, but can be devilishly hard to pull off, particularly when the professions situate their professional training programs in different departments or even colleges [9, 10]. More often, IPE occurs among professions that cluster within a sector, such as allied health and social services. For example, the National Center for Interprofessional Practice and Education (<https://nexusipe.org/informing/about-ipe>) is devoted explicitly to improving health care through interprofessional collaboration in the health sector. Within the health sector, interprofessional training may be an easier sell to students aspiring to higher-touch professions such as social work and nursing [11].

Where the size of academic institutions drives division into colleges that may also become spatially separated, the disciplinary distance may translate as well to spatial distance, with separate campuses, schedules, support staff, and bureaucratic processes. Planning often is housed in Arts and Sciences, but sometimes tied to a school or college of public affairs, design, or architecture/landscape architecture, while social work often is housed with health sciences. Crossing professional boundaries higher up in an academic hierarchy raises other barriers, even when the service populations and professional activities clearly overlap and complement each other. The authors (a planner and a social worker) encountered steep barriers to cross-campus curriculum development, where students in Social Work and Planning study in different colleges located several miles apart and have dense formal programs of study that leave little room for what some may view as tangential elective courses. The onus may lay on motivated faculty to develop curricular materials (lectures, activities, assignments) that are sufficiently relevant, feasible, and engaging to overcome resistance from students who may chafe at new requirements that appear to fall outside their chosen profession [9, 10].

Other disciplines that intersect with planning and social work prioritize professional accreditation, including public health, design (architecture, landscape architecture), public administration, business, and law, among others. Indeed, Ben David [12] called for legal training for social workers, noting that the two disciplines interface, albeit with different characteristics, social work being process-oriented and seeking to aid and empower people and communities, while law is outcome-oriented and devoted to regulating social interaction. Ben David [12] further distinguished these professions in language (social work being personal and emotional, while law is general, abstract, and complex) and in power base (social work based on trust and consensus, and law on control and coercion). Just as the distinctly different legal profession holds relevance and value for more effective work by social workers, so too could academic training in community planning inform community practice social work, by sketching out the overlapping service populations and professional goals, and clarifying what planning functions are relevant to social workers. This includes ordinances and zoning (Where can you site a food bank or group home? How does one prepare an appeal to local government?), planning processes (authentic public engagement, comprehensive and special-purpose plans), and more. Core courses in planning cover the history of communities and of the planning profession, and may illuminate for community practice social workers the long arc of human settlements and the challenges found in towns and cities. Conversely, planning students would benefit from exposure to and training in social work principles such as neighborhood development or social organizations, and techniques for community-engaged work and data analysis.

5 Common ground and steep barriers

Academic training for community practice social workers and planners covers some of the same ground—understanding how communities form and how they function, how policy and programs affect communities and their constituent members, and the need for training in field methods such as needs assessment, asset mapping, and public engagement. Students and faculty

may have shared experiences and concerns, such as lack of respect for the professions, the need for continuing education, and the demands of the profession for licensure and accreditation. For both planners and community practice social workers, employment may be found in private, public, and non-profit sectors, working from the individual to community scale. Practitioners may be generalists or specialists. For example, planners may specialize in land use, transportation, economic development, or environmental planning, or any one of many sub-specialties (*e.g.*, historic preservation, climate-ready communities, rural and small-town planning, recreation gateways, and more). Community practice social workers who specialize may focus on specific populations, or on particular social problems, such as hunger or domestic violence.

The professions have shared roots that deserve more attention in professional training. Jane Addams, recognized as a founder of the social work profession, is also celebrated in the planning profession for establishing Chicago's Hull House, modeled on similar institutions in England, and later a network of such programs. Modern U.S. urban planning emerged around the turn of the 20th century along with public health and other progressive movements (*e.g.*, municipal improvement, municipal art, and more) before diverging later in the 20th century into a more technical managerial profession. Aspiring planners become acquainted with another Jane: journalist-turned-neighborhood-activist Jane Jacobs, who championed bottom-up resident-led action rather than top-down technocratic planning. In recent decades the planning profession has reconstituted and expanded somewhat dormant links with public health, with many shared themes and tools that cross professional boundaries. Indeed, spatial tools such as Geographic Information Systems, developed in geography and allied fields and heavily employed by planners, increasingly are being applied by social workers to understand, for example, the social determinants of health, or to map and annotate data about resources relating to health, education, transportation, recreation, and more. Planners likewise could benefit from exposure to and skill in tools used by community social workers to understand relations among community groups and the physical, built, and social environments they inhabit.

Barriers to joint pedagogy in social work and planning include the logistics of recruiting, advising, and supporting students studying both fields, managing faculty needs (course assignments, promotion and tenure, team teaching), institutional structure (degrees, departments, colleges and schools), and profession-specific requirements for accreditation and licensure. Competition for students may be a factor in decisions to create and maintain joint programs, given the added resources needed and higher burden on students to complete dual or linked degrees, particularly with professional training programs that push students to prepare for formal licensing or accreditation. Smaller programs may struggle to attract enough students and to manage the bureaucratic tasks required of academic units.

And yet, these barriers notwithstanding, there are clear areas of shared interest: community and economic development, food access and security, housing (cost, quality, availability), environmental justice, public health, and more. Linked planning/social work programs or degrees offered by some institutions typically reflect student interest; they may have few students participating, yet keep the structure in place to support the occasional student who chooses to pursue both fields. Both these professions benefit from students (particularly at the masters' level) who have completed a strong foundation in history, theory (including organizational and social change), policy, and methods, then have applied these in the field in community-engaged projects, through internships, research, studios, and service.

6 Allied professions?

We remain confident that our two professions, community practice social work and community planning, are complementary, each offering the other much to learn in pedagogy, applied practice, and better outcomes for individuals, households, and communities. Individually, in our professional communities, we have lively and inspiring discussions about the potential for collaborative and synergistic efforts. And yet, we see little formal structure in our academic institutions or in local governance and social service delivery that accommodates both disciplines or takes advantage of the potential advantages of collaboration. We hope that we are wrong on this count, and that we may hear from practitioners in both fields with examples of extant collaboration or opportunities to create new joint pedagogy and community-engaged work. If we continue to see these as separate professions with little in common, and little to learn from each other, we risk the potential loss of integrated and positive community development and growth.

Our experience suggests value in each of these two professions infusing current curriculum with explicit information about the other profession, beginning with a grounding in the role and practice of these professions, and their shared values and history (described above). Moreover, the

common requirement for both planning and community practice social work students to complete an internship presents an ideal opportunity for shared experiences. Community practice social workers could gain knowledge and skills in, for example, zoning, land use development, transportation planning, and GIS mapping, while planning students could gain a deeper understanding of community organizing, community resource assessment and family dynamics. Stronger integration of these two professions in the classroom may yield greater recognition of shared goals and values and more collaboration in practice.

Acknowledgement

The authors thanks Nick Gastelle for assistance with interviews.

Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that they have no conflict of interest.

References

- [1] Mucci N. Social Work and Social Welfare from a Multidisciplinary Perspective - A Challenge for Researchers. *Social Work and Social Welfare*. 2018, 1(1): 1-3.
<https://doi.org/10.25082/swsw.2018.01.002>
- [2] Wenger E and Wenger B. *Introduction to Communities of Practice: A Brief Overview of the Concept and its Uses*, 2003.
<https://www.wenger-trayner.com>
- [3] Nisbet G, Hendry GD, Rolls G, et al. Interprofessional learning for pre-qualification health care students: An outcomes-based evaluation. *Journal of Interprofessional Care*. 2008, 22(1): 57-68.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/13561820701722386>
- [4] Payler J, Meyer E, Humphris D. Theorizing interprofessional pedagogic evaluation: framework for evaluating the impact of interprofessional continuing professional development on practice change. *Learning in Health and Social Care*. 2007, 6(3): 156-169.
<https://doi.org/10.1111/j.1473-6861.2007.00156.x>
- [5] Checkoway B. Core Concepts for Community Change. *Journal of Community Practice*. 1997, 4(1): 11-29.
https://doi.org/10.1300/j125v04n01_02
- [6] Cohen AK, Schuchter JW. Revitalizing Communities Together. *Journal of Urban Health*. 2012, 90(2): 187-196.
<https://doi.org/10.1007/s11524-012-9733-3>
- [7] Simmons L. Community organizing in social work and progressive urban planning – interdisciplinary challenges and opportunities. *Journal of Community Practice*. 2024, 32(3): 267-284.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10705422.2024.2384594>
- [8] Tropman JE. *Micro, Mezzo, and Macro: A Guide to the Levels of Social Work*, MSWOnline, 2023.
<https://mastersinsocialworkonline.org>
- [9] Shay E, MacNamara M. Planning and social work: teaching pre-professional university students across colleges. *Journal of Community Practice*. 2023, 31(1): 11-23.
<https://doi.org/10.1080/10705422.2023.2188339>
- [10] Shay E, MacNamara M. Rural Community Development as a Teaching Environment for Cross-Professional Training in Macro Social Work and Community and Regional Planning. *Contemporary Rural Social Work Journal*. 2019, 11(1).
<https://doi.org/10.61611/2165-4611.1183>
- [11] Park J, Hawkins W, Hawkins M, et al. Attitudes Toward Interprofessional Collaboration Among Students in the Health Care Professions. *Advances in Social Work*. 2013, 14(2): 556-572.
<https://doi.org/10.18060/2953>
- [12] David VB. Legal education for social work students: Toward an interdisciplinary framework of teaching and practice. *Social Work and Social Welfare*. 2021, 3(1): 111-120.
<https://doi.org/10.25082/swsw.2021.01.004>