

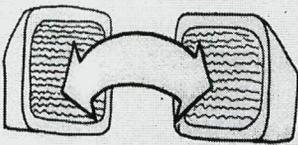
A Journey Into the Future: MSW Distance Education in California

The authors reflect on many of the monumental tasks which went into the collaborative creation of a successful MSW Distance Education Program involving California State University Campuses.

by
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Prologue

The plane is just touching down at Los Angeles International Airport, ending a journey of three years, many thousands of miles, innumerable moments of anguish, uncertainty and excitement, and culminating in two graduation ceremonies in the northern part of our state in the last three days. Our minds are a bit frazzled.....we can only ask ourselves, "How did we ever manage to get ourselves involved in this monumental effort and was it worth it?"

We began our journey into distance education with some fear and trepidation, and with more uncertainty than should be allowed in any activity. We represent faculty members in a large and very diverse Department of Social Work, housed in a public university in Southern California, and have each played an active role in the development and implementation of the Distance Education Program at CSULB. Let us take you on some of the most exciting and exasperating days of the journey so you too can think about taking the quantum leap into what will most likely be a common (rather than out of the ordinary) educational arena in the future.

The Journey Begins

Why did we start this Distance Education Program anyway?

Thinking back, it's hard to remember exactly at what point all of this distance education discussion really began and at what point it took shape. We went through a variety of strategy planning sessions, meetings with many different groups of people, many disagreements about form and substance, and ultimately, agreement and the start-up of the program itself. The main thrust and direction for undertaking the project was the result of a very dynamic and visionary leader of the Department of Social Work at the time, someone who knew about social work education efforts in distance education projects throughout the country and strongly believed that the faculty at CSU LB was the right group to bring the effort to the West Coast. California State University, Long Beach, is part of a statewide network of 21 educational institutions attempting to serve a geographically large state. The major population centers throughout the state have a state university in their communities, but only half of them offer the MSW degree. Many rural communities in the central and northern part of the state have no MSW degree program in reasonable

geographic proximity, and social services in these communities are sorely in need of a professionally trained workforce.

An additional impetus for the development and implementation of a distance education MSW program came primarily from concerns that the public and private social service agencies throughout California were increasingly unable to recruit and retain masters-level social workers to work with disadvantaged populations, especially children, minorities, and those on public assistance. The California Social Work Education Center (CalSWEC) indicated that the lack of professionals in many human services departments in California "precludes" many agencies from meeting accepted standards for working with seriously abused and mentally ill clients. In their 1994 study of California's smallest county child welfare departments, which are primarily located in northern California, these findings were underscored, with employee statistics indicating that out of 800 social work classified positions identified by the survey, only 11 MSW's were currently employed by the counties, with 8 of these assigned to child welfare services.

Faculty at CSULB had for a number of years been equally concerned with the poor retention of MSW trained social workers in the local county offices, and we saw the plight of Northern California counties as similar to our own. The CalSWEC program, which began the Title IV-E Program throughout the state in 1990, had creatively acted upon their concerns in this area. Their

mission was to "increase the numbers and improve the preparation of social workers for working in the public social services." The Title IV-E Program had made a significant difference in the local county hiring and retention practices—perhaps they could provide the same impetus to our northern county partners.

The two university sites that became a part of the Distance Education program were equally concerned about the training and development of social workers, particularly at the MSW level. Both sites had high quality, CSWE-accredited BASW programs but were keenly interested in the MSW level educational opportunities becoming available to their student population. Both sites indicated that many non-traditional students were interested in completing an MSW degree, but heavy work and family responsibilities made it impossible for them to complete a traditional, full-time, two-year program. Geographical distance also precluded these students from the extensive travel necessary to attend any of the existing MSW programs in the state.

All of these factors made a strong argument for a part-time distance education program as the best vehicle to provide the educational training and experiences that would help meet both documented community social service agency need and demonstrated student interest.

CalSWEC was a willing and very innovative partner in the effort from the first proposal of the program, and in fact, was a primary stabilizer in the planning and implementation efforts.

Their mission was firmly incorporated into the program itself and, as a primary funder of the program, provided invaluable financial and personnel resources that made the program come to life.

How many proposal reports do we have to write, and to how many different constituency groups?

Every day it seemed as if we were preparing another set of statistics, rationale statements, funding proposals, and program drafts. We thought we knew a great deal about collaboration, but this effort brought that word to the very essence of its meaning. Collaboration always involves struggles with turf, control, and power and requires expertise in relationship building and development. Even though all of the partners shared the same ultimate goal for the program, many perspectives were identified, and there was a great deal of jockeying for position, re-writing of documents, and fine-tuning the final product to meet everyone's wants and needs. CalSWEC, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), CSULB University College and Extension Services, University administration at CSULB, CSU Humboldt and CSU Chico, Department of Social Work Faculty at CSU Humboldt, CSU Chico and of course, CSU Long Beach, Child Welfare agencies of Butte, Humboldt, Del Norte, Siskiyou and Glenn counties, were just a few of the players in this situation. After we wrote multiple documents and sent out copies for review by the collaborators, every reviewer had suggestions to add and re-write, and it seemed to go

on and on.

Completing the commitment for funding support was all important. Discussions with CalSWEC moved forward in a positive and productive manner. Their frequent interaction with child welfare administrators throughout the state, and particularly with The Association of Small Counties that would specifically be impacted by this proposal, had cemented the groundwork for great support and enthusiasm. The submitted budget was approved and we had a funding commitment in hand. Next, we waited for CSWE and the approval of our Proposal for an Alternative Program.

Finally, we were approved to move forward with the program, and in fact we would begin the first courses in the Fall, just a few short months away from our receipt of the approval letter. So....how do we do this thing called Distance Education?

Within a few days of receiving the approval, we were off and running. Preparations began in earnest for the recruitment and admission of appropriate students at both of the distance sites. That task of course, fell to the Director of Admissions at CSULB who was already in the midst of admitting the entire MSW and BASW class at Long Beach. This included reviewing initial applicant folders and assigning them to faculty for paper review and ranking, tabulating faculty reviews, interviewing approximately 400 applicants in person or by phone, and admitting the students to the various full-time and part-time models at Long Beach. This individual took on the additional challenge

(I think the idea of having to do this process only one time for the three-year cohort was a help in taking on the added work), and was soon assigning the distance applicant folders to faculty for review. She creatively utilized the technology for "over the television set" admission interviews, and had a class in place ready to begin the academic year.

Preparation of the technology at each of the sites was in full force. Media Technologists at each of the sites worked together to fine-tune the systems and to work out as many of the glitches as possible before the first class session. Of course they were not always successful, and some technical difficulties presented themselves throughout many of the class sessions during the first year. By years two and three, necessary upgrades and refinements had been made and the system worked much more consistently. An additional necessity was having a contingency plan in place for each class session in case the technology did not work correctly. Imagine your shock and surprise as you move through your lecture, showing overheads and giving important information, only to find out that one of the sites had lost its video or audio capability somewhere during the class period.

Efforts were also underway to hire a Site Coordinator at each of the distance sites. The Assistant Director for Graduate and Undergraduate Coordination at CSULB took on Distance Education Program Coordination as another responsibility in her job description. She really pulled things together and kept the glue

on all the edges throughout the three years. Site Coordinators at Humboldt and Chico came on board and numerous telephone conversations ensued as last minute preparations were completed for opening day.

The first day of the first class was an amazing experience. An hour before the class was to begin, people began gathering. Students were anxiously awaiting the "real beginning" to their MSW experience, both at the two distance sites and at the home classroom in Long Beach. The Site Coordinators were ready to coordinate activities and assist with in-class teaching exercises as needed, and the faculty were ready to face the television sets. There were, of course, several people to offer congratulations and welcome—actually there was little teaching time that first morning class session as so much time was taken to recognize all of the involved participants and supporters and to be sure that everyone felt acknowledged and appreciated.

The curriculum for the MSW program is a solid series of foundation and specialization courses, building upon one another in a logical sequence. The easiest thing about developing the distance education model probably was the curriculum; it was already well established, course outlines were on file, texts for the fall semester at CSULB had already been ordered. We asked, "couldn't we just transform everything as is for our distance classes? If so, it will be very little extra work."

Our approved proposal outlined the courses which had

been selected to be taught over the technology and which would be taught by in-person faculty at the local sites. The task was to identify prospective faculty that were willing to teach over the technology, were willing to invest extra time and energy to adapt their normal teaching style to technological requirements, had taught the class before so were familiar with the content (we felt they would be more at ease were this the case), and for on-site faculty, to make this identification in the local communities. Talk about a challenge!

The Field Education department was also exceptionally well organized and established. We strongly supported the notion that it was critical to maintain all aspects of the existing field work model, regardless of the location in which the program was offered. This philosophy assured that the integrity of the field education sequence was maintained, and that decisions were not made based on individual student situations that would compromise the overall integrity of educational design. For the most part, our experience with distance education was that our field work model was able to be transported in its entirety and that exactly the same expectations, guidelines, policies, and procedures were followed at all three sites. Despite student statements that we needed to design a field work program particular to their individual and community needs, and that these needs were radically different from the more urban communities and students at CSULB, we found that our existing program was able to meet the needs

equally well regardless of the urban or rural environment. Scarcity of qualified field instructors and agencies was a more significant issue in the smaller, rural areas; but the basic experiences to which students would be exposed, the basic concepts and skills that students needed to learn about and develop competency in, and common difficulties encountered by students in field work placements remained astonishingly similar in all three locations (Cohen & Black, 1998).

With our 20 years of combined experience in field education and our work with thousands of BASW-and-MSW level students, we thought we had heard almost all of the possible scenarios about field education. Some interesting new situations quickly presented themselves which had us calling on all of our problem-solving and strategy building skills to deal with them efficiently and effectively. We found that many of the MSW professionals worked for multiple agencies, or had worked for many of the agencies in the community over past years. Additionally, since 75% of the students in the distance education cohorts were employed by social service agencies they knew both personally and professionally most of the potential field instructors.

Boundary issues and assuring that each student had two different and educationally focused field work placements presented quite a challenge. In the two summers of the three-year program, students completed their field work placements. The preparation for this task was more time consuming than we had ever

imagined. We both can recall sitting at the computers in our offices, frantically writing letters to the various agencies we would be using, making out the letters for student placement assignments in the first year, confirming with the agencies that the placements had been made, and then doing an even more complex process for the second summer when students had the opportunity to interview at two agencies for their placement. While we used the same forms and procedures, we tried to tailor all of the paperwork to specifically identify each of the sites and to personalize the process as much as possible. The Site Coordinators were working hand in hand with us, but were new to the arena of administering and coordinating a field education program, so they were learning along with the students.

Together we struggled with all the additional programs that field coordinators provide both field instructors and students. This included orientations for students about the placement process; orientations for both groups to prepare them for their first field experience; ongoing field instructor training; and ultimately an appreciation day. Being our first distance field experience, the two of us came to the conclusion that our programs would need to be conducted face to face. Field instructors needed to know who we were, and students needed to meet us. This, therefore, would not be done via the technology. Thus, plans were made for us to travel to the sites, incurring considerable expense and enormous blocks of time. It required multiple visits as we

scheduled each of these events.

The trips were very successful as we were able to recreate what we traditionally did at the host program in Long Beach. One adaptation we made was possible as there was clearly a much smaller group at each site. Instead of holding separate functions for students and field instructors, we combined the two and while one of us prepared the field instructors, the other provided the students with the material we consider essential before entering the field. At lunch we had them meet, begin the process of developing a relationship, and spend time working together on some appropriate issues facing both of them. Our field instructor training was limited to the orientation and one session during the year, again requiring a visit to each site. As a result, we were kept very busy all year handling questions and concerns on the phone.

While planning for the second cohort three years later, we were asked, "What does it say about distance technology if it is good enough for classes but not for preparing students for field!" This was an eye-opener. We quickly realized that having been intimidated by cameras and lights, we had convinced ourselves to do programs live to avoid using the technology.

An amazing amount of time was spent handling administrative details. We had done all of the work to identify and hire the local faculty at the two sites, but who imagined it would take so many steps to get them signed up with the university. As the first summer period, which would

involve a field work placement and faculty field seminar instructors, approached, we began hearing from the newly hired "faculty" that they had not received their contracts. Calls to the university presented us with the response that the new employees had not come to campus to check in, show their personal identification, and be processed with faculty contracts and pay arrangements so, of course, they could not expect to be paid. Imagine their surprise when we reminded them that these individual did not live just down the road, but 600 miles away. With some fancy footwork, we were able to get things arranged, and contracts and paychecks did finally arrive.

Trying to coordinate library access for all three sites was another challenge. All of the classes offered under the distance program were scheduled on Saturday. This allowed the students do be involved in their on-going employment experiences during the week, with their Saturdays reserved for two classes (three classes during the summer months when Field Work and Field Work Seminar were also offered). These distant campuses had limited library hours on the weekend, which included some Saturday hours, but usually only from 8 AM - 5 PM, exactly the same hours the students were in class. Lots of discussion and consultation with library specialists at each site resulted in adjustment of library hours to offer some access to students.

What have we learned from our

first experience?

The first and most important lesson of the experience was the necessity of planning ahead. How many times do you find faculty who prepare their lecture two to three weeks in advance of the presentation date and have all of the handouts, overheads, and discussion questions ready for duplication and distribution? Add to this formula the importance of having a contingency plan (i.e. a video tape or in-class discussion topics) ready for each class session in case of technical failure. Our experience helped us learn the importance of not only having all of these tasks completed well in advance of the scheduled class meeting time, but sending forward by mail (at least one to two weeks ahead of time) copies of all of the handouts, in-class exercises, etc. so that the Site Coordinator could review them, consult with the faculty member as necessary, and feel prepared to assist in the distribution and explanation of materials to the distant site students. The panic phone call from the Site Coordinator indicating none of the class materials had arrived by the scheduled Saturday morning class struck terror in the heart of us all.

A second critical lesson learned had to do with the necessity of frequent and regular communication! The Site Coordinators needed to know everything that was happening with the programs' logistics, plans and administrative issues. How quickly we became aware of the convenience of proximity as we moved forward in this effort. Since the

Site Coordinators also worked at other jobs during the week, they were available only on weekday evenings, and they were only at the distance site on Saturday (class day), so we couldn't leave them a phone message or fax something to them there. Evening phone calls and a busy fax line to their homes became the main method of communication. The CSULB Coordinator instituted a weekly information and support session. Everyone found it immensely helpful to use the scheduled time to update each other on current issues and upcoming events or deadlines.

A purposeful and planned orientation for Site Coordinators was implemented for the next distance education cohort. All of the Site Coordinators came together for a two-day conference at CSULB as the new three-year program began, providing information about our curriculum, sequenced offerings for the students, policies and procedures guiding the administration of the MSW program, and most importantly, an opportunity to brainstorm about potential problem issues and learn from our first years of experience. Administrative Faculty at the host university have honed their assessment skills to be able to ask the right questions when a situation arises and to be able to provide consultation, intervention strategies, and helpful feedback to the Site Coordinators when an action plan is necessary.

Preparation and orientation of faculty teaching over the technology was an important consideration, and something that we did not do as well as we might

have liked during the first experience. We essentially expected faculty to be able to teach their content area over the technology just as they did in an on-site classroom. We didn't provide enough support to faculty to begin to deal with the nuances of teaching in this manner, the special challenges to developing cohesion between sites and engaging students at a distance, or the administrative demands and coordination activities that seemed to fall to the classroom instructor. These issues have most certainly been looked at, and orientation and training to faculty teaching in the program have been much improved in the new cohort.

Orientation and on-going training for Field Instructors and additional student information about field work are critical to the success of a distance education program. This year, we took the very bold step of providing these activities via the technology. Finding a room that could hold the 150 students starting field in Long Beach and being linked up to four sites simultaneously was a monumental undertaking. After weeks of meetings, discussions, and communications between the sites, the technology experts, and our field faculty, we were almost successful! We were able to hook up with three sites and video the event which was then sent to the fourth site as they were unable to access the technology on that particular date. Seeing oneself on the screen was indeed a daunting experience, but we quickly got used to it and were able to focus on the critical information we were presenting.

Following this, two of the

field faculty were brave enough to volunteer to provide the field instructor training via the technology during the year. After discussion as to what was the best color to wear, they have become accustomed to the cameras and screen and it has been a less stressful year as the field instructors are clearly better prepared.

One of our really wise decisions in the first cohort was to travel to the two sites to provide a field instructors' luncheon to acknowledge their efforts with our students. It was very evident that the field instructors as well as the site coordinators were appreciative of the effort made to recognize the field instructors. An opportunity was made available to allow each of them to share their perceptions of the program. This elicited some very valuable ideas, many of which we were able to incorporate into our second cohort.

Of all the trips we made, and there were many, this is the one we will repeat this year. Saying thank you to the field instructors' and the site coordinators really does need to be face to face. Plane reservations will be made and lunches scheduled for this next round.

Developing and maintaining a presence in the communities involved in our distance education programming is a gradual process that will continue into the future years. We have interacted with the educational community, the social service community, and the professional community on a number of levels. This process is a true collaboration, in which it is important to involve all of the participants in active planning and

evaluation and to be able to be open to change and different perspectives. The host university is a visitor and guest in the distant communities, and we must continue to provide a program that is responsive to the needs of the individual communities, as well as to social work education as a whole.

A final lesson learned is the importance of maintaining integrity in highly publicized circumstances. This distance education program was highly visible, at both the home institution and the distance sites, as well as throughout the social work education community. This high visibility, while of great benefit, also put the program, the students themselves, and the evaluation component in an interesting position. Under such close scrutiny, it is easy for boundaries to become blurred and decision-making structures to become dysfunctional if there is too much interference, second guessing or contradiction of decisions and policies. This level of visibility also increases the pressure for total success and makes it exceedingly difficult to identify and work toward a resolution of a difficult performance situation. Adherence to departmental policies, procedures, and guidelines consistently at each of the sites is critical to the effective development and administration of the program.

We strongly believe that our distance education program and CalSWEC support have had a positive impact on the public child welfare sector within all of the counties involved in the project. It has validated our early

assumption that graduate social workers would prove to be a valued and sought after addition to health and human service agencies. In both of the counties where the university sites are located, the County Department of Social Services is the largest employer of human services personnel. A number of the students were hired to work in Child Welfare services even prior to their MSW graduation. Clearly, the goal of increasing the pool of professionally trained, MSW-level child welfare workers was achieved in the central and northern areas of the state. Equally important, we have had a tremendous impact on the social work education community, providing a model for part-time MSW education utilizing distance technology. Rigorous and extensive research activities throughout the project as reported by Potts & Hagan (2000) yielded outcomes similar to those observed in CSULB's on-campus program in terms of grades, course evaluations, field instructor ratings, and five of nine aspects of overall program quality. Potts & Hagan provide important recommendations for social work educators to address, as future distance education efforts are made across the country.

The Journey's End or The Continuous Loop to Begin the Journey Again?

At CSULB, many things have changed since the implementation and completion of the first cohort of students in our Distance Education Program. One of the authors has retired from the

university, and the other has moved into the Director of Field Education position in the department. The department has undertaken another three-year commitment of Distance Education offerings—this time to four campuses throughout the state. This new effort has been able to build upon the lessons learned from the past and from some of the changes that were made in the administration and implementation of the Distance Education program this round. Perhaps the answers to some of the questions we have posed for you helped us come to the decision to again move forward—from a distance—and attempt to make a further difference in professional social services and child welfare programs.

Some things have remained the same. The amount of time and energy it takes to nurture and maintain a Distance Education program is phenomenal. The current director of field is now feeling as if she has a telephone attached to her ear at all times; not only does she administer the Field Education program at CSULB with 500 BASW and MSW students, but she also has an additional 80 students at site locations in Bakersfield, Ventura, Chico, and Humboldt to keep her awake at nights. The faculty who are teaching in the program don't have a live audience of students at CSULB while they are teaching over the technology, but still do have to build cohesion and effective learning strategies with students at two sites, plan well in advance of every lecture, and visit sites several times each semester. The four Site Coordinators are filling multiple roles during

their interactions with their students, their local university faculty and administrators, CSULB Department of Social Work faculty and administrators; completing CalSWEC Program tasks and responsibilities; participating in team teaching and site interactive teaching situations; as well as developing and monitoring field education experiences. Program administrators are probably pulling their hair out on many days, attempting to juggle multiple constituency groups and financial demands and to collaborate with a variety of communities, interests, and personalities.

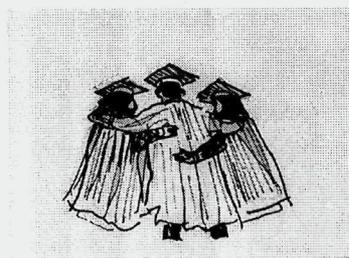
Was it (and is it) worth it?

Absolutely—at least in our opinion. The exhaustion and never-ending work takes its toll on faculty and administrators, and students feel over burdened as well. But the outcome brings such joy and a sense of pride, in terms of improved services to children and families, a more positive view of child welfare services and the social workers who provide them, and the look in the eyes of parents and significant others who see loved ones at graduation having fulfilled a life-long dream that previously was beyond their grasp

Each of us has special memories of our efforts during the first three years. Some of those memories are ones we keep with us, and others are those we try not to remember! Since we made many trips back and forth to the sites during these three years, we have lots of memories of sitting in very small airports waiting for the fog to lift, for the

pouring rain to stop, and for the scheduled flight to actually take off. Our most vivid memory of a flight was one of our first experiences flying back to Los Angeles from Humboldt. We had spent two days there providing an in-person orientation to students about field work and one day of intensive work with the Site Coordinator identifying prospective placement sites for the upcoming field work assignments. We sat upstairs in the airport—the rain was coming down so hard it seemed to shake the entire building. We waited for several hours and then, miraculously, they announced that the plane would be leaving. It was the scariest plane ride either of us had ever been on; the small plane (I believe only 15 seats) bounced around as if being tossed from cloud bank to cloud bank. We ended up circling some extra minutes (it seemed like several hours) waiting for the fog to lift and allow us to land in San Francisco. Even the stewardess said it was the roughest flight she had even been on—and we had to make this flight four more times each year for the next three years?

The most special memory



the two of us have of the three years was the "Graduation Weekend." Looking back, it was like a traveling graduation wagon. Five faculty from CSULB flew to

Humboldt, where we were met by the two Site Coordinators from CSU Chico and CSU Humboldt, making us a group of seven. Graduation at Humboldt was held outside on the football field, on a very rainy and cold day. The graduation ceremonies included all of the university students and faculty, and we joined and marched with faculty from CSU Humboldt Department of Social Work. Our MSW students were announced and hooded as they crossed the stage to a roar of support from family, friends, and many of the community-based field instructors who had worked with the students in field placements. The students had planned a reception for their friends and significant others, and we all enjoyed sharing the day with one another. We left the Humboldt Site Coordinator and the six remaining faculty members piled into a van and drove to Chico (about a five hour drive) through winding mountain roads and a pouring rainstorm. Graduation at Chico was a small ceremony of just our MSW students. (The main CSU Chico graduation was a week later and we were not able to be included in that ceremony.) Our intimate ceremony was in a campus auditorium, filled to capacity with friends and significant others, who watched the new MSW's receive their hoods and change their tassels. We had an outside reception planned by the students, on a beautiful sunny day. We left the Chico Site Coordinator, and the five of us from CSULB piled onto the plane to fly

from Chico to San Francisco and, finally, back to Los Angeles. Quite a journey and one that will be remembered with fondness for many years to come. Yes, the experience was definitely worth it.

Epilogue

The plane has finally stopped rolling—the mad dash to gather up hand luggage, de-plane, and claim large baggage items is complete. Tomorrow morning we each teach a class starting at 9:00 AM....Wonder if we've prepared that lecture yet? In just five days, we will have another graduation for our main campus students—300 of them. It will be a wonderful ceremony and reception for families and friends; graduates will shed tears of joy and happiness and family members will meet faculty who had a significant impact on their sons and daughters.

Faculty who have been involved in this first distance education effort may shed some tears as well, some relief at having successfully completed the task and a great deal of pride and sense of accomplishment for the work and the results. Perhaps, the most important memories of the whole experience are the faces of those graduates miles away, who were truly appreciative of the efforts, and who will be able to enrich their communities' social service delivery systems and positively impact the lives of children, families, and adults because of this work. CalSWEC deserves a special thank you for their innovative

and visionary work as a steering partner and supporting force for this innovative effort in our state. We know they share our sense of pride and accomplishment.

About The Authors

Jan Black is Professor Emeritus at California State University, Long Beach. She was the Director of the Department of Social Work from 1997-1998. During her 13-year tenure at CSULB, she taught social work practice, social work administration, and field work seminar and served as Director of Field Education. Professor Black was instrumental in the development of the field education curriculum at CSULB, which has received national recognition for excellence and has been an active partner in numerous collaborative efforts throughout the Los Angeles area as well as throughout California and the United States. She served as a member of the National Commission on Field Education for the Council on Social Work Education, as well as on numerous university, College of Health and Human Services, and Departmental committees. She retired from the University in August 1998.

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