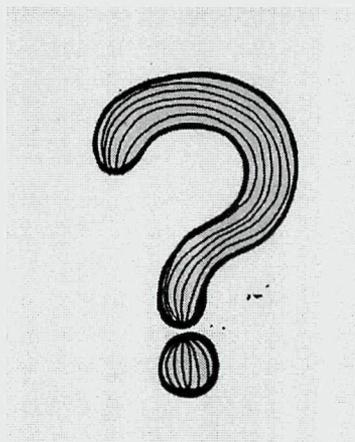


The Creation of CalSWEC 1989-1992: Why Did it Work?

The author was the first Executive Director of CalSWEC and offers his perspective of overcoming early barriers in the creation of the program.

by
Bart Grossman

Bart Grossman, MSW, Ph.D., is Adjunct Professor and Director of Field Supervision, School of Social Welfare at U.C. Berkeley.



The California Social Work Education Center was, at its inception, and continues to be the largest state coalition of social work educators and practitioners in the United States. It manages and disseminates more than 16 million dollars and supports about 600 MSW students a year; it conducts in-service training, curriculum development, and research. Its membership includes 14 Schools of Social Work, 58 County Departments of Social Services and Mental Health, the State of California Department of Social Services, and California NASW. It is about to celebrate its 10th anniversary.

How did such an unlikely thing come to be? How did this alliance take off and stay on its flight path despite the vagaries of funding, turnover in leadership, institutional mistrust, and competitive interests, while many others have crashed and burned? As founding Director, I got to sit on top of the booster. The experience taught me a great deal about building and maintaining coalitions—about the power of seizing opportunity, the necessity of stubborn persistence, the inexpensibility of leadership, the political potency of good faith, and about depending on the kindness of strangers who become friends.

The inspiration for CalSWEC came from a variety of

people, places, and policies, but there is no question that it all came together around Harry Specht, Dean of the School of Social Welfare at UC Berkeley. A complicated, committed, curmudgeonly charmer, Harry was the indispensable man who convinced, cajoled, connived, and sometimes cowed a group of strong, creative personalities into working together for a common cause. The background to the story was an interrupted courtship.

Graduate Social Work Education and the Public Social Services: The Second Time Around

The profession of social work in the United States, despite the distractions of the depression and two World Wars, has maintained a primary commitment to the sponsorship of nongovernmental services and individual-focused practice. At the start of the 60's there were some indicators of a new focus—government-funded cooperative-research and training endeavors, state funded stipend programs and on-site field units all based in public social service agencies.

It might have been expected that the partnership between the public social services and graduate social work education would grow and flourish. In fact, in California, as in other places, the courtship did not end

in marriage. The left-based attack on welfare institutions, which preceded the attack from the right, was in great part abetted by social work faculty and students. Nascent partnerships and field placement relationships produced more conflict than constructive change.

By the mid 70's, relationships between schools of social work and social services departments became so poisonous that the state had closed down its rather generous stipends program. The proportions of students placed for field work in public social services departments dwindled, and, to a substantial extent, for 15 years social work faculties and social welfare administrators stopped talking to one another.

However, by the late 80's, the schools of social work, the professional organizations, and the public agencies began to talk again. What changed? The saying goes, "The enemy of my enemy is my friend." The profession, the schools, and the public agencies had all endured a withering attack from the right. It was natural that they might begin to recognize the advantages of an alliance. Those social workers who did go into the public social services in the 60's and 70's, people like Richard O'Neil in Santa Clara County and Ernie Hirose in San Mateo, had been moving up in the ranks. They believed that the person-in-environment perspective made social workers uniquely qualified to serve multi-problem clients, but they were having difficulty attracting and retaining MSW workers.

The 80's saw a marked growth in the population requiring services. It also saw public outrage over both increased reporting

of child abuse and ineffective social work practice by untrained and inappropriately educated workers. Courts in some states had already ordered welfare agencies to improve worker training, and the states turned to the social work schools for assistance. The federal government began to allocate resources to meet the demand for a professionally prepared child welfare workforce. Most significantly, access to Title IV-E foster care funds for training and education was eased and the federal matching share increased.

At the same time, the tremendous growth of immigrant and minority populations in California created a special recruitment issue for agencies here. Simply not enough social workers of color were being trained and hired to begin to match the diversity of the client population. Where there were workers of color, they tended to be in the lower employment ranks with limited opportunities to move up. These trends energized social work educators who were discouraged by the growth of social work involvement in private practice. Alliances with the public agencies presented an opportunity to reinvigorate the commitment of the profession to the poor and to public social welfare. Increased financial aid resources and public employment opportunities could attract both idealistic young students of color and promising current employees to the profession and to the schools. One of the loudest voices crying out against the drift of social work to private practice with the "worried well" was the voice of Harry Specht.

The Birth of BASSC

UC Berkeley School of Social Work, under his leadership, had struggled to enact a mission preparing MSWs for the publicly supported social services. It had reinvigorated its field placement relationships with county welfare agencies. When I came to Berkeley as Director of Field Education in 1981, I found only one student in a child protective service agency field placement. By 1988 all first-year students were in public agency or contract placements, and we had substantial fieldwork relationships with nine Bay Area counties.

Discretionary funds available to the School were used for student fellowships to encourage students to do additional field work in public agencies. Curriculum requirements were focused on work with populations served by the public services. New faculty were hired with this priority in mind.

Ed Nathan, Director of the Zellerbach Family Fund, became Harry's major co-conspirator. Ed had a good relationship with the local counties and he played matchmaker, funding conferences and luncheon meetings among educators and the directors of county social services. These efforts led to the formation of the Bay Area Social Services Consortium (BASSC) around 1985. This consortium, which continues to this day, consisted of nine Bay Area County Social Services department executives, the Berkeley Deans and the directors of the three regional State University Schools of Social Work: Sacramento, San Francisco, and San Jose.

Development of a Statewide Program

The success of the BASSC co-occurred with the beginnings of a training partnership among the three Los Angeles County Schools University of Southern California, CSULB and UCLA—and the Los Angeles County Child and Family Agency. Fate lent additional hands by providing an interested, forceful President of NASW, Marsena Buck, who was at the same time the President of the California Welfare Directors Association (CWDA). With the prodding of Marsena and NASW executive Ellen Dunbar, the state social work deans and the directors of county social services met for a weekend in 1988, battering each other with recriminations and finally deciding to get beyond past resentments. The meeting concluded with an agreement that the two groups would work together to create a state-supported stipends program to attract graduate students to careers in the publicly supported social services.

Ed Nathan moved events along again, introducing Dean Specht to John Lanigan of the Ford Foundation. John was having little success in a quest for social work educators interested in training a work force to meet the demands of the recently passed Family Support Act. Ed saw that Harry and John were made for each other. He also assembled a group of local foundations to provide a match for a five-year Ford grant.

It took approximately one year to write a formal proposal establishing The California Center for Graduate Education for the

Publicly-Supported and Nonprofit Social Services (which became CalSWEC because our receptionist could not possibly say the original name every time he answered the phone). I helped write the grant and came on board as director with a full-time secretary and two graduate student assistants, Tony Santagelo, who went on to write his dissertation about CalSWEC, and Sherrill Clark, who is now CalSWEC director.

Barriers to Collaboration

The creation of a coalition of organizations is inherently a political process. Participants generally have some interests that overlap and some that conflict. For example, the vision for CalSWEC covered all fields of public social work practice, including child and family welfare, health, mental health, and aging. But the agency representatives on the Board of Directors were county welfare directors who took the lead in initiating legislation to create a state stipend program, thereby capturing the initiative for child welfare.

The budget for the Center was channeled through Berkeley, tapping into some long-standing suspicion among the other Deans, who had little history of cooperation at the state level. Some feared that they were getting into bed with an elephant.

Between the schools and agencies, barriers to collaboration arose from differences in organizational culture including differences in values, norms, reward systems, and decision-making and operational styles. For example, agency administrators

were surprised to learn that deans and directors could not commit their schools without faculty consultation.

The pace of change in the schools was slow, yet the personnel seemed relatively consistent. The agency directors had much greater authority, but they seemed to come and go much more frequently. In truth, after ten years only two of the original deans and none of the foundation social services directors remain.

What Worked

BASSC provided lessons that we applied in creating CalSWEC; other things we learned from other experiences and by instinct, accident and necessity. These included:

1. Build the partnership first: While the promise of funding was a key motivation and CalSWEC eventually unlocked a substantial state/federal funding source, we took the time to build relationships before we started looking for money. We also took the time to shape a broad common vision of significance to all members for a major change in social work practice and education. These relationships and the broad, shared vision sustained the coalition during the first difficult years.

Moreover, we sought to pursue funding in ways that would strengthen the partnership. For example, rather than employ an outside consultant to write our state contracts, we decided to learn the IV-E rules and regulations and do the work ourselves. This created a substantial

learning curve for me, but it ultimately provided us with more control of our own fate and with expertise in the central administration, enhancing the value of the coalition to its members.

2. Show them the money: It was important to demonstrate early that a coalition could accomplish things that none of the parties could accomplish alone. Although it meant diverting some energy from the longer term objectives, we immediately pursued an HHS interdisciplinary grant that no one thought we could get. Not only did we get it, but we got the largest national multi-year award ever given by the Children's Bureau. It seemed a coalition of all the social work schools and counties in California could get some attention.

That experience within the first year of CalSWEC's existence not only sustained us through the ensuing two-year struggle to unlock federal child welfare funds, it helped us to build capacity, skills and important contacts, and it taught us to work as a team. In the long run, IV-E was an ideal funding source for this coalition. The funds would never have been available to the Universities alone nor could the state have "made the match" without access to University overhead. Thus, it was a shared resource. It was also a significant enough resource to deliver on a substantial piece of the founding vision.

3. Spread it around: It was important to demonstrate that while Berkeley housed the central offices and handled the ac-

counting, it was not going to try to grab the lion's share. Many projects were sub-contracted to other members. For example, CSULB, under Director Jim Kelly, took the lead on distance education programs. We worked with Fresno State to develop the first regional child welfare training academy. Research priorities on "best practices" studies were controlled by the agencies since they have the greatest immediate need for this information.

Funding opportunities for research, creation of training materials, innovative educational outreach programs, etc., were made available to everyone in the coalition. Project directors were funded along with faculty in each school, so the connections were multi-leveled and the budgetary impacts were significant enough to overcome personnel changes. The links among individuals expanded to become links among institutions.

4. Reframe conflict as opportunity: The greatest threat to the survival of the coalition came within the first few months when it was learned that the Los Angeles County school deans, Rino Patti, Jim Kelly and Len Schneiderman, were proceeding with a separate IV-E contract with their county agency head, Peter Digre. This was initially perceived as undercutting and greedy by the other schools. The L.A. deans saw it as responding to a unique and huge county with over 40% of the kids in the state and 600 open positions.

Some demanded that the L.A. schools choose one path or the other. To have pushed that de-

mand would certainly have split the coalition and probably disabled the broader initiative. Instead, after some ventilation, an accommodation was reached allowing the L.A. schools to participate in the statewide effort but adjusting their participation so that their total IV-E share would be comparable to other schools.

This accommodation was based on a realistic appraisal of the differences between other regions and Los Angeles. The L.A. effort then became a sort of pilot that helped to garner state support for the broader project. The experience of weathering this crisis and of making a decision based on longer-term good rather than short-term emotions strengthened CalSWEC immeasurably. It modeled a way of operating that allowed the participants to "lay all their cards on the table" in future dealings, with the expectation that others would respond supportively to their individual needs and constraints.

5. Respect "turf": As CalSWEC began to define its program, our early processes of coalition building provided a base of mutual understanding and sympathy among the beleaguered administrators on the board. The members respected the integrity of the participating institutions and developed procedures and norms that wouldn't threaten anyone's autonomy. For example, rather than devise one standard model for all schools, the curriculum committee, under the leadership of Ben Cuellar, director at Fresno State, and Sherrill Clark, devised a set of common competencies

which each school could deliver within its own curricular framework.

The selection of social service directors for the board was left to CWDA, seen as the proper venue to manage inter-county politics. In order to respond to the pressing staff needs of the agencies, preference for student stipends was given to current non MSW employees and to applicants of color. It was agreed that agency staff who applied would require a letter of support from the county director who could thereby stay on top of personnel issues in their own organizations.

6. Balance the power: Every effort was made to ensure equity and share control. While Harry was principal investigator on the grant, he was never the chair of the board. In the first three years Anita Harbert of San Diego State was chair, so Dick O'Neil, a welfare director, was vice chair. After Dick became chair the balance was rotated ever few years. Meetings moved around the state and between schools and agencies.

Though the Center was located at Berkeley, staff devoted as much or more time to developing and supporting projects in other schools and regions. It was a sign of Harry's vision that he never clutched. He understood that CalSWEC needed to be more than Berkeley.

7. Never give up: The first year or so of CalSWEC was a dicey time for me. I began to understand the potential of IV-E, but I encountered one obstacle after another. When deans and directors asked in meetings, "When will the sti-

pends begin," I would smile and say, "Soon, soon." I knew it would happen sooner, or later, but certainly not never—I wouldn't let myself go there.

Every system seemed to have a "pencil pusher" whose job was to prevent anything from happening. I came to understand that these pencil pushers could also become allies who would make things happen if you engaged them with respect.

When direct strategies failed, we improvised. With Andy Dieppa, Dean of San Jose State, and Dick O'Neil, Director of Santa Clara County DSS, I set out to involve the state Department of Social Services which would have to draw the federal money. However, there was no one home in Sacramento. It was two years into the Wilson administration and no one had been appointed state Director of Social Services.

Finally we decided to invite the Undersecretary of California Health and Welfare to make a presentation to BASSC. Over lunch, we surrounded her with deans and county directors and Carol Rosen, one of those "bureaucrats" from HHS Region IX. Carol deserves the most credit of anyone for making the stipend program happen. Carol patiently explained how IV-E could support education with no additional cost to the state. Watching Carol that day, I came to understand that chiefs come and go; in the end it's the "bureaucrats" that make things happen.

Conclusion

That CalSWEC happened, that it worked, that it

goes on seems both unlikely and over-determined. It was the right time, but mostly it was the right people—people like Harry and Ed and the others mentioned above who were able to dream together and willing to work together despite the unlikelihood of the dream coming true. Langston Hughes wrote, "Hold fast to your dreams for if dreams die life is a painted bird that cannot fly." It was a bumpy but a terrific flight. I'm very pleased to have been aboard.

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