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Sherry F. Queener, Ph.D.
Director of the Graduate Office, IUPUI
Associate Dean, Indiana University Graduate School
Indiana University Graduate School
Union Building, UN-207
Indianapolis, IN 46202

Re: proposed MSW Direct Program

Dear Dr. Queener:

Thank you for the opportunity to review the proposed MSW Direct Program, to be administered by the School of Social Work at IUPUI. I am the Director of the University of Alaska Anchorage School of Social Work and was instrumental in the development of a distance delivered MSW program for Alaska in 2003. Therefore, I have eight years of experience administering a distance MSW program and appreciate the complexities of such an under-taking. It was interesting to read about the plans at IUPUI and I appreciate the chance to provide feedback based on my experience.

My general response is the proposed program is strong in design and given adequate resources-- viable in implementation. A strong team of faculty and administrators has developed the proposed program with considerable thought and expertise. The proposed program is similar to other online MSW programs with some unique and meaningful aspects for students in Indiana and targeted areas.

My feedback is best characterized as questions for you and the team to consider as you make final decisions about launching such a degree. I suspect many of my questions are already answered but not necessarily apparent in the materials available to me. I apologize if I've misread or overlooked specific pieces of information.

Curriculum considerations:

The proposal includes the development of a new advanced generalist concentration for the distance program. The advanced generalist concentration is not offered with the campus-based MSW program and represents an effort to provide curriculum most relevant to rural and other targeted students. Indeed, many of the distance MSW programs, including our own, includes an advanced generalist concentration.

The Council on Social Work Education Commission on Accreditation (CSWE COA) needs to approve the addition of a new concentration to an existing accredited MSW program. This approval is separate from approval for implementation of a distance program. I was unclear in reading the proposal if there has been approval from CSWE COA for the new advanced generalist concentration. The proposed conceptualization of advanced generalist practice is consistent with other programs, following a similar curriculum plan for preparation of advanced generalist social work practitioners. Although a necessary step, there should be no difficulty in securing approval from CSWE for the new concentration.

Scheduling considerations:

The proposal includes an alternative schedule with students attending part-time (taking two courses) on a year-round quarter plan—based on eleven-week quarters. This is a significant departure from the traditional fall, spring and shortened summer schedule of most universities. The proposed curriculum offers flexibility for students because eventually, all courses will be offered each quarter without students being locked into a cohort, sequenced plan. Although ambitious, a large program may be able to support such a schedule.

We have also considered using a modified year-round schedule and encountered a number of difficulties that may or may not be relevant to your institution.

Important elements of a revised schedule include:

1. Impact on faculty teaching in the distance MSW and other programs (i.e., BSW, campus-based MSW and the doctoral programs): Workloads, scheduling of courses, and availability of administrative support impact faculty on an alternative schedule. Will faculty be teaching all four quarters? Will they be teaching in other programs on the traditional schedule? How will this impact campus-wide service responsibilities? Time for research? Teaching distance courses on a compressed eleven-week schedule places increased demands on faculty time for preparation and delivery of courses. Issues of faculty compensation for teaching distance courses and adequacy of technical assistance for instructional design and distance delivery are common issues for new distance delivered programs; these issues may be compounded by an alternative schedule. Are faculty represented under a collective bargaining agreement that will recognize an alternative schedule? Will teaching on an alternative schedule in the distance program be valued as a contribution to the mission of the school and rewarded through tenure and promotion? Will the synchronous portion of classes be offered on an evening and weekend schedule—requiring faculty to be available at such times?

2. Impact on students enrolled in an alternative schedule: An alternative quarter schedule will impact students who are taking courses from other disciplines as electives, managing families with children, and working full-time jobs (not unique to a distance program, but an alternative schedule requires year-round attention to school as well other responsibilities). Demands resulting from compressed eleven week courses on a year round basis may make part-time study difficult for many students. Will the university financial aid office be able to accommodate student loans on an alternative schedule of courses?
3. Impact on practicum placement options: Many field practicum sites are not equipped to manage internships year-round. The Distance Field Education Coordinator will have to work with students and practicum sites to develop manageable schedules that meet educational needs while working within the operating schedule of the institution (both university and practicum site). Schools are frequently the best option for practicum placements in rural communities, yet most school systems observe a traditional academic year calendar.

Fiscal considerations:

The proposal identifies resident and nonresident tuition for Indiana but does not specify if there will be additional program or course fees required for the proposed Direct MSW. The proposal outlines significant and realistic personnel and technology requirements to successfully execute the program. Faculty, IT, and administrative costs will be higher for a distance vs. a campus-based program. How will these additional costs be paid?

A hidden (and significant) cost in the proposed program involves travel for field practicum coordination, particularly if the program serves a national and international student body. In our experience, the field coordinator needs to visit a prospective field site prior to developing an interagency agreement and return to the site a minimum of once each year while students are completing practicum placements. Students who are experiencing problems may require repeated on-site visits. Despite students' proficiencies with technology for distance education, practicum instructors/supervisors frequently lack the skills (and infrastructure) to participate in technology-enhanced communication, needing face-to-face time to develop a trusting relationship with the University, receive the training they need for field supervision and support working with students, particularly when problems emerge.

Faculty considerations:

The success of the proposed program is dependent upon the faculty preparation for distance delivery of social work education. The proposal describes a strong group of five faculty with the expertise to manage the technology and deliver the content for an advanced generalist program. Will these individuals teach the majority of the course offerings? Our experience has taught us that adjunct faculty have difficulty teaching with a distance format, lacking the time and background for prepping and

delivering distance courses. Yes, there may be people out there willing to adjunct teach, but the integrity of the program will require full-time faculty offering the core curriculum. Managing and overseeing adjunct instructors will require considerable effort to guarantee the quality your students need.

I hope this feedback is useful as you consider going forward with the distance MSW program. Please feel free to give me a call if you have any questions or would like to discuss your proposal further.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'E. Sirles', written over a horizontal line.

Elizabeth A. Sirles, Ph.D.
Director and Professor