

# Social Work

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## Course

### SOCW316 - Social Welfare Policy & Contemporary Issues

This course is designed to provide students with an understanding of American social welfare policy analysis. This course will review historical, current, and emerging social problems and critique policies created or proposed to respond to these problems. Students will learn how to understand and critically analyze social policy, while taking into account the basic principles of economic and social justice. Specific focus will be given to the impact of the formation and implementation of social welfare policies on the poor, people of color, women and other at-risk populations.

By the end of the course the student should be able to:

- Understand the historical background and competing societal values which underlie current social welfare policies and programs.
- Understand the role of ideology, values, and ethics in policy formation and implementation with special attention to the ways that such policies affect the poor, people of color, and other oppressed populations.
- Acquire knowledge and skills that enhance the ability to understand the ways in which policy interacts with micro, mezzo, and macro environments to promote or hinder the principles of economic and social justice.
- Demonstrate knowledge and skill by utilizing a model of policy analysis to research and critique a social welfare policy.
- Demonstrate an understanding of the connections between generalist social work practice and social welfare policy.
- Engage in policy advocacy.

### **Ignatian Mentoring Project: Applying Ignatian spiritual exercises to the course**

“Gospel exhortations to feed the hungry and clothe the naked are not hard sells” (Eifler & Landy, 2014, p.xii), especially at a Jesuit University. Students may be encouraged to volunteer their time and monies to charities and may have chosen to attend a Jesuit University because such an education seems a good fit with their existing values or their interest in helping others. Teaching a course on social welfare may seem like a sensible way to tap into this desire but social work practice, although involved in helping, is neither volunteering nor charity work. In addition, the discipline has (appropriately so) a non-theological approach.

Ignatius provided the Church the Spiritual Exercises which he believed could help individuals “discern God’s call in their lives” (O’Brien, 2015, p.2). One exercise involves imagining oneself

looking down on the world and seeing all the bad things that are happening as a result of people turning away from goodness. I imagine children crying themselves to sleep without the comfort of a parent who is more focused on their own addiction, a man sleeping outdoors in the park during a snowstorm because he is homeless, or a teenager sentenced to life in prison. These are some of the images shared with students in this course as palpable examples of how social welfare problems impact individuals.

This social welfare policy course includes learning about social welfare problems, discovering social welfare policies that respond to that problem, and discovering how policies are actually enacted because policy implementation is often so different from how we typically think such things work. We follow this by wondering if that is right, just, or the best we can do in the U.S. Then, students are challenged to imagine better. I have begun philosophically to frame this course as 'Inspiring Empathy and Outrage'. Concretely, the students are challenged to discern what they can do.

Contemplating social welfare policy action can feel highly overwhelming. Social welfare problems are not amenable to simple solutions and students (as well as their instructor) may feel paralyzed in the face of such huge, complicated issues. Yet, the next step in the exercise provided by Ignatius is to sustain hope by discerning what we are called to do to heal the world.

In this course, I have begun to support the students to consider what they are called to do both 'big and small'. 'Small' does not apply to the size of the action but rather the number of people impacted. 'Small' refers to working with individuals. By learning about social welfare problems and how both the problems and policies impact individuals, I hope to inspire empathy in the students for their future clients. Hopefully, this results in improved, genuine, empathic practice for social work students who are reminded that clients don't care what you know until they know you care.

Acting 'big' involves impacting a larger number of people or addressing social change on a larger scale. Since this may seem intimidating, this action is structured using Kush's book, *The One Hour Activist*. Included in this short reading are the 'dos and don'ts' of policy advocacy with elected officials.

The assignment directions state that the purpose of this assignment is to demystify legislative advocacy. Each student is to type a letter to their lawmaker at any level (local, state, or federal) using the suggestions from Kush's book *The One-Hour Activist*. Students are expected to actually mail the letter to the lawmaker. Bonus points are awarded for students who receive and share with the class an individualized response from their lawmaker.

The framework of discerning policy action both big and small hopefully makes the course and topic of social welfare policy seem relevant to all students, not just the rather small minority who are interested in policy advocacy. A visual representation of this framework is included.

## References

Eifler, K. E. & Landy, T. M. (2014). *Becoming beholders*. Collegeville, MN: Liturgical Press.

Kush, C. (2004). *The one hour activist*. Somerset, NJ: Wiley.

O'Brien, K. (2015). The Spiritual Exercises as a foundation for Jesuit education. *Conversations* 47. 2-4.

*Social Work Policy Practice*

LEARN-DISCOVER-WONDER-IMAGINE

Inspiring Empathy & Outrage



*Discern*

*What are you called to do?*

**Act**

**ACT—SMALL**

Social Work Practice

Students will deliver effective social work services to clients, rooted in genuine empathy and enhanced by understanding the impact of social welfare problems and policies on those individuals.

**ACT—BIG**

Social Welfare Policy Advocacy

Students will write an effective letter to their legislator utilizing Kush's suggestions from The One Hour Activist in order to demystify legislative advocacy.