

External Review Report

**Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work
University of Toronto
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Introduction

I was asked by Cheryl Regehr, Ph.D., Vice-Provost, Academic Programs, to serve as the External Reviewer of the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work (FIFSW), and to coordinate my site visit with that of the Ontario Council on Graduate Studies (OCGS) appraisal of this same unit. This combined external/OCGS appraisal or “augmented review” allowed OCGS consultants Professor Anne (Ricky) Fortune¹ and Professor Carol Stalker² to focus on OCGS criteria, while I concurrently addressed the University of Toronto’s Terms of Reference. I spent three full days receiving briefings and meeting with various stakeholders. These meetings involved central university administrators, faculty, administrators and staff and students within the FIFSW, Deans of cognate disciplines (law and nursing), professional association representatives, field educators, and alumni. I attended each meeting the OCGS evaluators participated in, and was given every opportunity to ask questions of all parties.

I was specifically asked to address the numbers items listed below:

1. Size, scope, quality and priorities of Faculty’s education activities:

- **Consistency of the programs with the general objectives of the University’s mission and with the standards, educational goals and learning objectives of the degree.**

I was provided with and reviewed copies of the documents titled *Towards 2030: A long-term planning framework for the University of Toronto*, as well as copies of the September 2008 and May 2009 *Update on Academic Plan 2004-2010* prepared by then-Dean Cheryl Regehr for the FIFSW, a copy of the 2004 *Academic Plan* (Executive Summary), prepared by then-Dean Jim Barber, and the 2009 *Academic Update*, prepared by Interim-Dean Faye Mishna. This aspect of the external review was also addressed throughout my face-to-face interviews with stakeholders throughout the three-day stay.

The overall University of Toronto planning framework sets out an understandably high set of expectations related to maintaining a research-intensive culture, academic rigor, and

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excellence of faculty, staff and students. All faculty are to be involved in the university's teaching mission, and the university will enhance its global reputation. It wishes to support a wide breadth of disciplines, and to contribute meaningfully to the prosperity of Toronto, Ontario, Canada and the world. It is anticipated that at the St. George campus where the FIFSW is located, undergraduate enrollment will decline somewhat and graduate enrollment be enhanced. Student recruitment will aim at increasing the proportion of students from outside the Toronto region and more students from abroad. The University of Toronto also seeks to become a leader in digital education. It is asserted that "all programs be excellent and that most be nationally pre-eminent and internationally competitive."

Is the FIFSW a unit that is consistent with these standards?

I believe that a compelling case can be made to answer this question with an unambiguous 'yes'.

Documentation was provided to myself and the OCGS team of the successes the FIFSW has had in submitting research contracts and grants, and in getting them funded. Over 70% of eligible faculty are Principal Investigators on Council Grants, arguably the most prestigious award available in Canada. For 2008-2009 the faculty administered 55 projects whose total awards amounted to over \$10m. Additional projects under joint-sponsorship bring the overall total to more than \$13m. Although appropriate faculty buy-outs are provided in return for service on funded research programs, all faculty remain well-engaged in the program's teaching mission through classroom instruction, research supervision, Ph.D. committee service and service as a major professor. Completed doctoral dissertations reflect a global influence, with projects conducted in China, Sri Lanka, Uganda, and Rwanda, among other countries. There are a number of on-going international faculty projects (the China project), and a respectable proportion of students, particularly Ph.D. students, are from abroad. Documentation was provided on the numbers of articles, and citations thereto, of works authored by FIFSW authors, and the program easily ranks within the top 10 in North America. Unpublished data I am preparing found the FIFSW to be the 5th most productive faculty in terms of articles appearing during the past five years among six major social work journals. This ranking is a modest improvement over prior analogous data collected by myself and others.

Masters-level enrollment has markedly increased, by 50 students annually, in the past year or two. This has had a salutary influence on tuition revenue, and provides greater value-per-dollar to the taxpayer in terms of the increased numbers of graduate professionals serving the province and nation. Applications greatly outnumber available MSW spaces, so the quality of admitted students remains high. Ph.D. enrollment is stable at about ten new students a year, from a pool of about 50 applicants, making it a very competitive program, nationally.

Is this an 'excellent' program? – yes. Is it 'nationally pre-eminent'? – yes. Is it internationally competitive? – yes. By the above UT institutional benchmarks, which I believe are legitimate indices of academic quality, the FIFSW is proceeding in a manner

expected of programs within your overall university. Are there areas for improvement? Yes, and some of these will be noted below.

- **Quality of teaching, and evidence that research, professional activities and scholarships are brought to bear in teaching.**

The FIFSW emphasizes the integration of research and practice in the classroom and in its practicum education. While not quite the same as adopting evidence-based practice as a unifying curricular theme (as some other social work programs have done), this emphasis is a laudable one and virtually mandates that classroom content be informed by relevant research, where it exists. The establishment of the *Research Institute for Evidence-based Social Work* is a wonderful initiative, and the listing of seminars and workshops (5 – 11 annually) provided by the institute to the entire U of T and local community, including practitioners and field instructors, helps maintain this integration of research into practice. These seminars have also provided graduate students with a venue to present their work, as well as bringing in prominent scholars. A required MSW course is titled “Research for Evidence-based Practice”. In the seven years prior to April 2009 there were 21 publications in refereed journals authored or co-authored by UT MSW students. Of 18 Ph.D. students who recently responded to a survey on publications, about 30 journal articles or book chapters and 13 book reviews have been authored/co-authored by them. The Ph.D. program materials do not explicitly focus on the integration of research into practice and offers no analogous course relating to evidence-based practice. It seems more oriented towards a traditional research doctorate (albeit of exceptionally high quality), and not as directly focused on the integration of research into practice as is the MSW program.

MSW students can fulfill their practicum requirements by completing a research internship through one of the numerous projects supported by the FIFSW, and doctoral students are frequently provided with research positions on funded projects as a part of their overall financial aid package, or as part-time employment. The fact that the individual faculty are themselves productive scholars helps ensure that current research is infused in their teaching. There is a research thesis option, but very few students avail themselves of this opportunity (research theses are in general very rarely completed by MSW students in North America, given that the degree is generally seen as a professional degree, not solely an academic one). The additional demands required of a thesis, combined with limited faculty availability to supervise these projects, tend to discourage students from taking this option. A review of the viability of the thesis option is currently underway, as a new model is being tested. Other research experiences available to MSW students include an independent research/reading course with a faculty member. Longitudinal course evaluation data we were provided indicates extremely high levels of student satisfaction with classroom instruction, levels roughly comparable across the different types of faculty (e.g., full-time vs. contract).

- **The quality of the educational experience provided to students beyond the classroom.**

This is difficult to credibly appraise, not just at the FIFSW but among social work programs across North America. Two year program MSW students complete two separate internships (during their first and second year of study), while advanced standing MSW students (those who had earned the BSW) complete only the second one. The first year internship is usually a fairly generic one, and students have a restricted range of choices about these placements. The second year placement (also completed by the advanced standing students) is focused in one of the program's five areas of concentration (Children and their Families, Diversity and Social Justice, Mental Health and Health, Social Work in Gerontology, and Social Service Administration) and students have more input as to their placement setting. One Professor is undertaking an innovative approach to measuring the quality of the students' practicum experiences (the Practice-based Evaluation Tool), and this will be very useful as the profession has long lacked good measures in this regard. Interviews with MSW students indicated general satisfaction with their placement experiences. Certainly the array of experiences the U of T metropolitan area provides MSW students is without parallel in Canada. The practicum experience available via the FIFSW cyber counseling program is a unique innovative experience.

2. Scope, quality and relevance of the Faculty's research activities. Is the level of activity appropriate in terms of comparisons nationally and internationally? Are research activities appropriate for the graduate students in the Faculty?

The scope of research is very wide-ranging, as indicated by the titles of articles, and Ph.D. theses originating from the FIFSW. The quality is high, as evidenced by the success of the faculty and graduate students in publishing their work in peer-reviewed professional and scientific journals, as well as by their success in obtaining highly competitive council research grants. Both numbers of proposals, and the 'hit rate' are very impressive, with about 71% of the faculty receiving SSHRC/CIHR grants from 2007 – 2009. 2008-2009 saw an all-time high of 46 funded external grants/contracts received by the FIFSW, up for the 4th year in succession. I think it would be fair to say that the FIFSW leads Canada with respect to research activities, and all but a handful of programs in the USA. The affiliation with the Campbell Collaboration is a significant positive development, and pending availability of resources, should be promoted. (By way of disclosure, I am a member of the Social Welfare Editorial Board for the Campbell Collaboration, and have a protocol under review with them.) The first C2 systematic reviews to originate in Canada in social work come from the FIFSW, another hallmark of research credibility.

I would encourage the faculty to consider a greater level of investment in what is called intervention research, planned evaluations of the outcomes of existing and newly developing social service programs and policies. In examining the titles of Ph.D. theses completed during 2004 and until the present, I found an almost exclusive focus on the academic study of people with various psychosocial issues, and only one project that

appeared to be an outcome study (Popova, 2006) of whether or not clients who received a particular program benefited from such services. Most Ph.D. thesis projects appeared to be risk assessment, correlational, surveys, or phenomenological in nature. Given the slender evidentiary foundations of many social work programs, policies, and clinical interventions, the FIFSW could take the lead in promoting intervention research studies within Canada, focusing on *solving* psychosocial problems, not just their academic study, often with little direct applications to practice. Or, on a more macro level, doctoral theses could evaluate provincial or federal welfare policies. The titles of funded research Council Grants received by the FIFSW reflect a similar dearth of intervention research projects.

Having made the comments in the above paragraph, I would like to emphasize that the level and scope of research activities afforded graduate students are most certainly appropriate and of high quality.

The FIFSW has a number of tenured or tenure-earning faculty who are citizens of the USA. I believe that these individuals are eligible to be PIs on research grants from various US federal agencies, such as NIMH, NIAAA, NIDA, NSF, etc. Consideration should be given to promoting research grant applications from your USA faculty to USA funding sources, especially federal USA agencies.

As a licensed clinical social worker, I was curious about the existing practice of University of Toronto MSW students being able to complete a *research* practicum in lieu of one that involved direct practice with clients. It appears that a student could potentially graduate with the MSW (traditionally the profession's terminal practice degree), and become a Registered Social Worker in Ontario, and lack any practice experience at all. I would hope that the research practicum opportunity is only made available for MSW students who are aware that such a learning experience will not be the most optimal one for a career in direct practice, and that if they have plans to engage in direct practice, then they should select a practice-based internship.

3. The scope and nature of the Faculty's relationship with cognate academic departments and units at the University of Toronto. Has the Faculty developed or sustained fruitful partnerships with other universities and organizations in order to foster research, creative professional activities and to deliver teaching programs?

I met with the Deans of Law and Nursing, who had very positive appraisals of the FIFSW. This program offers two combined degrees - JD/MSW (with the Faculty of Law) and MHSc/MSW (with health policy, Management and Evaluation in the Faculty of Medicine). If these existing combined degrees are attracting and graduating a sufficient number of students, consideration could be given to further integrated programs, such as joint MSW/MBA or MSW/MPH programs.

The FIFSW participates in an array of collaborative and interdisciplinary programs in areas such as addiction, aging, bioethics, ethnic and pluralism studies, health care, sexual diversity, woman and gender studies, and community development. Six faculty have

status-only appointments, which promotes intellectual diversity within the FIFSW, and a number of Category 5 faculty have primary appointments in local hospitals, CAMH, community agencies, and other universities. One concrete example of a fruitful partnership has been the cyber-counselling initiative which provides services to students attending St. Michael and Victoria colleges. One contract faculty member is assigned 51% social work and 49% Aboriginal Studies. Other regular faculty have cross-appointments with an array of UT programs, including medicine (psychiatry) and nursing. One faculty member served as the U of T Anti-racism Officer. Outside experts in an array of disciplines are regularly brought to the FIFSW to provide seminars, training, and guest lectures on research and practice topics. Interdisciplinarity seems a strength of the FIFSW.

4. The scope and nature of the Faculty's relationship with external government, academic and professional organizations. What has been the social impact of the Faculty in terms of outreach and impact locally and nationally?

Meetings were arranged with representatives from various professional organizations (Jewish Family & Child Service, Baycrest Centre, CAMH, Hinks-Dellcrest Treatment Centre, George Hull Center for Children and Families, Ontario College of Social Work, Ontario Association of Social Work). The FIFSW is a major player with these organizations. Its students perform thousands of hours of internship services within agencies, the individual faculty conduct research in host agencies, and the provincial and federal governments consult with the program. Exact assessment of impact is difficult to reliably ascertain, but the stakeholders we met with provided consistently positive feedback on the role of the FIFSW as a major resource for MSW practitioners, for consultation and technical assistance in dealing with local issues, as a resource for continuing education and professional development, and as responsive to community needs. For example, the new graduate diploma (scheduled to begin enrollment in the fall of 2010) in Social Service Administration emerged at the request of community agency need and will help organizations obtain properly prepared administrators, or permit existing managers and administrators to obtain a further academic qualification.

5. The appropriateness and effectiveness of the Faculty's organizational and financial structure. How well has the Faculty managed resource allocation, including space and infrastructure support?

The FIFSW has been well served by a succession of highly competent Deans who have consistently moved the program in the direction of greater quality. The current organization structure seems to be working well. However, as a former Dean, I noted that the organization chart reflects lines of authority that have 9 administrators reporting directly to the Dean, with no buffering role of an Associate Dean. This is a common problem. Every administrator desires direct access to the Dean and resists any strengthening of the Associate Dean's role. However, many successful programs do have some program directors (e.g., MSW, Ph.D., Continuing Education, Field) report initially to an Associate Dean of Academic Affairs, leaving the Dean more time for university-wide issues and fund-raising. As the FIFSW searches for a new Dean, the existing

available former Deans may wish, from their coign of vantage, to indicate to the new Dean their views on the functionality of the current organization, versus one that strengthens the role of the Associate Dean for Academic Affairs.

Given these difficult fiscal times, the FIFSW has admirably managed its resources. Space, as noted in prior OCGS and other evaluations, has been a long term problem. However, the Factor-Inwentash endowment agreement stipulates that the FIFSW be provided more space, and this promise is being fulfilled with some additional space being recently allocated, and longer terms plans in place to occupy additional building space currently occupied by other U of T units. The new Dean should be sure to follow-up on seeing that these promises are fulfilled.

Some social work programs are making greater use of the Blackboard instructional platform to teach entire sections of classes on-line, absent any face-to-face meeting. While it is not yet clear that this is an optimal, or even comparable, method of instruction, consideration may be given to piloting such an initiative on a trial basis, by offering one section of a multi-section didactic course exclusively on-line. See how well its spaces fill with students, and how the on-line students do on examinations and term papers, relative to students receiving live instruction for the same course. This may be a pragmatic way to alleviate some of the scheduling and space pressures.

The planned growth in MSW enrollment has helped with tuition revenue, as has the Factor-Inwentash endowment permitting the creation of five endowed professorships and 50 student scholarships. However this endowment money is all dedicated to these specific purposes. The amount of unrestricted endowment money is unclear, but obviously of great value to the operations of the program.

The FIFSW research operations are currently funded from the program's operating budget and donations. Consideration may be given to building an endowment specifically dedicated to supporting faculty and doctoral student research, perhaps by naming the Research Institute for Evidence-based Social Work, or other readily identifiable aspects of the program.

Information technology/computer resources within the FIFSW seem of high quality. The building has WIFI and the university library is a world-class research resource. Research support (providing information about funding RFAs,, assistance in the preparation of grants, administration of grants once an award has been made, etc.) all seem very well supported.

5. The quality of the Faculty's vision and its long-range plan.

I found the Faculty's vision to be outstanding, perhaps comparable to only one or two other programs with which I am familiar, specifically that of the George Warren Brown School of Social Work at Washington University in St. Louis, and of the Department of Social Policy and Social Work at the University of Oxford, UK. Its focus on the integration of research into practice is a theme consistent with forward-thinking elements

within the profession, and if emulated by other programs, perhaps has the potential to positively affect professional social work education to the same extent that the Flexner report revolutionized medical education in the US and Canada in the early part of the 20th century. The link between the FIFSW and the Campbell Collaboration is one to be promoted, as is the general approach known as evidence-based practice. The program seems to me to be a wonderful asset to the University of Toronto, the city, the province, and the country. Some international graduates make significant contributions in their home countries, and the FIFSW service programs (e.g., the China Project) combine pedagogy with social services to an admirable extent.

It has been said that “Man plans and God laughs” Given our recessionary economy and the prospect of a new Dean being hired soon, some flexibility in carrying out current university-wide and FIFSW long terms plans are going to be inevitably required. However the Faculty is well positioned to do this. Morale among the faculty, students and staff seems high. The FI endowment has greatly strengthened the program, as have the new faculty hires augmented the existing impressive cadre of professors. Student applicants remain high, the demand for graduates is also strong, particularly outside the Toronto metropolitan area. Provincially the profession is being strengthened by new legislation legally regulating the practice of psychotherapy and this will make the MSW an ever-more-attractive graduate degree. There is a serious shortage of Ph.D. level social workers to fill the demands of the academy, of government, and the practice sector, and the doctoral program should continue to do well. It is to be hoped that the new Dean will be supportive of existing positive initiatives, as well as bring new insights into the administration of the program. The existing template for the future of social work at the University of Toronto is an excellent one, fully compatible with the long term plans of the university as a whole.

N. B. I would like to thank the individuals responsible for coordinating the agenda, my travel and hotel arrangements, and the extensive briefings covering three full days. I was extended every courtesy and was impressed with the competence and professionalism displayed by everyone involved in this visit. I learned a great deal about this excellent faculty and believe I came away with a reasonably informed appraisal of the program and university.

Respectfully Submitted on 16 November 2009

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