The School of Social Service Administration

MISSION

The School of Social Service Administration is dedicated to working toward a more just and humane society through research, teaching, and service to the community. As one of the oldest and most highly regarded graduate schools of social work, we prepare professionals to handle society’s most difficult problems by developing new knowledge, promoting a deeper understanding of the causes and human costs of social inequities, and building bridges between rigorous research and the practice of helping individuals, families, and communities to achieve a better quality of life.

PROFESSIONAL PURPOSE

Our educational program is grounded in the profession’s history, purposes, and philosophy. Founded in 1908, the School of Social Service Administration (SSA) is one of a handful of institutions that has helped define the profession of social work and the field of social welfare. SSA’s first leaders were activists in the Chicago settlement house movement, one of the main strands in what eventually became social work. Since its inception, while most early schools of social work concentrated on practical training for caseworkers, SSA’s leaders insisted on the need for a solid foundation in social science and social research as well. In the decades since, the emphases on social research and on applying the insights of social science to solving human problems have continued. The School continues to establish the connections between the social and behavioral sciences, research, and the real world of policy and practice. SSA’s interdisciplinary faculty is drawn from social work as well as from such related fields as economics, psychology, sociology, anthropology, political science, public policy, and public health. Research at the School reflects this diversity, and contributes to the development of social work knowledge.

The Master of Arts Program is a two-year program that has been continuously accredited by the Council on Social Work Education and its predecessor organizations since 1919. SSA was reaccredited through June 2020. The School prepares students for advanced professional practice. Based on a body of knowledge, values, and skills of the profession, SSA’s diverse course offerings provide students with a solid foundation in the profession and substantive exploration of two concentrations (clinical practice and social administration), the latter of which includes focused attention to non-profit management, community organization and development, and social policy. Quality instruction promotes the development of competent and effective professionals in these areas. Classes are intended to challenge and engage students in the dynamic interplay of theory, research, and practice. Students gain an understanding that whatever the focus of their practice, from the clinical micro-level to the policy macro-level, their activities are guided by an appreciation of service in society and informed by a rigorous evidence and conceptual base.

Since 1920, our Doctoral Program has provided training for those interested in pursuing an academic career in social work and social welfare. SSA’s doctoral graduates are leaders in the field of social work and social welfare scholarship. The program is designed to deepen students’ mastery of both social science theory and research methods so that students are prepared to contribute to scholarly knowledge in innovative ways. The program accommodates students who are interested in developing and evaluating practice methods and interventions as well as those interested in understanding social problems and accompanying institutional and political responses. The diverse theoretical approaches of SSA’s faculty make it uniquely positioned to support an interdisciplinary course of study.

VALUES

SSA’s educational program is informed by the values of the social work profession. As such, we prepare professionals who are committed to improving the lives of vulnerable and diverse populations and promoting social and economic justice locally, nationally, and globally. Social work values ensure that service is driven by a humanistic perspective that values difference and asks us to consider the impact of our ideas and our work on the well-being of our clients, of our colleagues, of our agencies, and on society as a whole. Our values require that we treat others with dignity and respect and make human rights and social justice central to our work. As a school, SSA strives to be an exemplar of social work education, committed to fostering an inclusive, engaging, and rigorous educational experience, welcoming to all.

Our values require that we behave ethically in both our personal and professional lives. Our ethical precepts encompass such matters as treating our clients with dignity, honoring human diversity and differences, never exploiting clients for our own interests, and always acting in the best interest of clients. This is accomplished through human relationships, honoring the value of integrity and giving graduates the competence to achieve professional goals of the highest quality. Similar precepts govern our relationships with other professionals. We recognize our responsibilities to the organizations for which we work, but we also have the obligation to question policies and practices in the workplace that may not be aligned with the best interests of our clients. We value scientific inquiry and the use of scientific evidence, as well as the development and implementation of evidence-
based policy and practice. Finally, our values require continued professional growth and development through lifelong learning.

PROGRAM CONTEXT

THE UNIVERSITY OF CHICAGO

Since its founding, the University’s mission has been expressed in its motto, Crescat scientia; vita excolatur, “Let knowledge grow from more to more; and so be human life enriched.” The University is committed to the development of new knowledge, both for its own sake and for the common good. The link of its mission to the mission and purpose of SSA is clear. As social problems become more complex, interconnected, and sprawling, SSA is building upon its distinctive interdisciplinary and applied traditions to generate more robust knowledge and to educate the most talented social work leaders, thereby achieving even greater social benefit, both locally and globally.

SSA’s first dean, Edith Abbott, said in 1920 when SSA became a full-fledged professional school, that “only in a university, and only in a great university, could a school of social work get the educational facilities that advanced professional students must have if they were to become the efficient public servants of democracy.” Our current President, Robert Zimmer, shares her sentiment and stated during his address during the 487th convocation, “The University of Chicago, from its very inception, has been driven by a singular focus on inquiry…with a firm belief in the value of open, rigorous, and intense inquiry and a common understanding that this must be the defining feature of this university. Everything about the University of Chicago that we recognize as distinctive flows from this commitment.”

In his speech at the City Club of Chicago in 2012, President Zimmer again emphasized the role of the University and SSA in generating knowledge for social benefit:

…since its earliest days, the University has strived to serve this city well. In fact, the University’s first president, William Rainey Harper, saw service to the broader community as essential to the University’s mission. To fulfill this mission, he established the Extension Division, which consisted of public lectures and correspondence courses, and the University Press, which dispersed University research to a wide audience. Both were revolutionary developments in American higher education. As Richard Storr wrote in his history of Harper’s tenure as president, “The outward thrust of the University was both deliberate and continuous.”

Zimmer continued,

I could offer a great many examples of academic and research programs that illustrate Storr’s link…. But I would like to turn briefly to the School of Social Service Administration, whose service to the community epitomizes that outward thrust at the same time as it underscores the university’s singular focus on inquiry and belief in data-driven arguments and ideas…. One of the earliest schools of social work, SSA has its roots in the Chicago settlement house movement and is firmly tied to the history and institutions of this city. At its inception, its mission was to provide professional academic training to those serving the most vulnerable residents in the city’s poorest neighborhoods.

Over the years, faculty members, administrators, and alumni have helped draft parts of the Social Security Act, have enforced child labor laws, and have fought for low-income working mothers. They have fostered the century-long partnership with Children’s Memorial Hospital (now the Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children’s Hospital of Chicago) and forged partnerships with over 700 agencies and programs throughout the city as part of their field placement program. They have moved from their professional training to leadership positions within social services agencies throughout the city and across the country, helping to shape the policies that transform lives. All the while, they have been focused on helping to find solutions for some of the most intractable problems of the city.

SSA is held to the highest of intellectual standards, and faculty recruitment and promotions are guided by rigorous expectations. Students take advantage of the opportunities available in the University, and are able to make use of the rich course offerings of its other departments. In addition to taking courses at SSA from faculty trained across multiple disciplines, students take courses in the schools of law, business, medicine, divinity, and public policy, and in departments of anthropology, sociology, psychology, psychiatry, and others. This is a university in which such a cross-walk between disciplines and departments is fluid, actively encouraged, and easily accomplished.

CITY OF CHICAGO

As a great American city, Chicago and its surroundings provide a superb context for learning in the field. It is one of the nation’s most diverse cities—a kaleidoscope of social and cultural traditions and populations. Chicago experiences all of the significant problems of the modern metropolis: poverty, violence, crime, dysfunctional schools, inadequate health services, drug use, family breakdown, social exclusion, and community disruption. Our students are able to witness, learn from, and contribute to this complex of activity.

Chicago has notably been at the forefront of pioneering movements in social work, community organizing, women’s rights, urban planning and architecture, labor organizing, and African American politics. Building on this tradition, recent initiatives such as the University of Chicago Urban Labs, including its Crime Lab, Education Lab and Health Lab; the Network for College Success; the Employment Instability, Family Well-being, and Social...
Policy Network (EINet); the STI and HIV Intervention Network (SHINE); CalYouth; the Smart Decarceration Initiative; and the Chicago Center for Youth Violence Prevention (one of six national Academic Centers of Excellence funded by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention)—all led or co-led by SSA faculty—yield both knowledge for the field at-large and tangible benefit to the citizens of Chicago, as well as offer opportunities to expand the University’s partnership with the City of Chicago. Our ever-deepening partnerships with the neighbors in our community serve to enhance the quality of life and economic development of Chicago’s South Side, as well as the City of Chicago more broadly and beyond to the national and international levels. With this, SSA plays a very visible role in materially advancing the University’s larger purpose to “enrich human lives.”

Most recently, SSA has been a chief architect in developing new University urban efforts, including the Mansueto Institute for Urban Innovation, which draws on the strengths of the University of Chicago, as well as SSA’s approach in applying multiple lenses to complex social problems. As a hub focused on the possibilities of urbanization, the Institute will accelerate urban scholarship through seed funding for such issues as health care, youth development, and violence reduction research—areas where SSA plays a major role. And as home to urban scholars trained in a dozen different disciplines, SSA also is vital to UChicago Urban, a newly launched University commitment that strives to understand urban issues and create positive impact on urban life. SSA has long pioneered the use of scientific research to identify the causes of and solutions to complex social problems.

THE GLOBAL CONTEXT

As social problems become ever more globally interconnected, SSA has adopted a strategic commitment to and begun the deliberate implementation of a robust international social welfare program agenda. Our program presently includes a significant focus on international social welfare by integrating cross-national and comparative content into our curriculum, developing study-abroad and internship placement opportunities for students, organizing lectures by international scholars visiting Chicago, and promoting scholarly and student exchanges in partnership with peer institutions abroad. With support provided by the University’s Provost’s Office, SSA has undertaken a permanent expansion of its faculty ranks, with a strategic focus placed on bringing in faculty with explicit expertise in global and international social welfare. Our first of several faculty hires in this emerging domain joined us in July 2012; since then, SSA has hired additional faculty members, taking SSA’s expertise on global questions to an unprecedented level, and allowing the School to forge a defining role in the globalization of social welfare concerns and problems. We now have a full cadre in place that takes up social welfare policy and practice across Asia, Central/Latin America, the former Soviet Union, and Africa, which also complements work in Europe. SSA faculty also serve on the Steering Committee of the University’s Center in Delhi, the University’s Beijing Governance Committee, and the international advisory board of the Indian Journal of Social Work. We are completing our third year of a concentration in international social work, which builds out field experiences in India, China, and Hong Kong, and through the University’s Human Rights program. In addition, we are beginning to develop a global social policy and practice certificate for a more substantive cluster of courses and fieldwork.

One outgrowth of our growing visibility on the global stage is a new acceleration of our international student enrollment, which reached an all-time high this year.

We run an annual, intensive, one-month study-abroad program on urban poverty and community practice for our master’s students in collaboration with the Tata Institute of Social Sciences (TISS) in Mumbai, India, the oldest established school of social work in that country. This program combines classroom instruction, field experience (pairing SSA with TISS students in a small set of community placements), seminar discussion, and informal engagement with students and faculty from both schools. The program includes a reciprocal exchange in Chicago, in which TISS students engage in a parallel program to the one in India, strengthening comparative learning across institutions and countries and building meaningful peer relationships. This work has also begun to generate research collaboration among faculty at both institutions.

In China, SSA has established a relationship with colleagues at Peking University (PKU), the home to mainland China’s oldest and most well-established social work program. We have hosted PKU faculty at Chicago on two separate occasions and have visited PKU to share insights and orientations to social work curriculum and field education as well as to explore common research interests. We are also partnering with PKU as part of the China Collaborative, an effort jointly sponsored by the Council of Social Work Education in the United States, China Association of Social Work Educators in China, and the International Association of Schools of Social Work to foster the advancement of social work education and the professionalization of social work in China during a time of rapid development. In addition to co-organizing with PKU two workshops in Beijing, SSA hosted, in fall 2014, a delegation of faculty from some of China’s leading social work programs, introducing them to a week-long immersion in SSA’s robust educational fieldwork-classroom integration.

We established, in 2013, an intensive Institute in China in partnership with Hong Kong Polytechnic University (PolyU) that focuses on responses to social exclusion in Hong Kong, mainland China, and the United States. The annual program allows students from SSA and PolyU to learn from and gain perspectives from each other. The intensive institutes have included local site visits in Hong Kong and Mainland China, where students have examined local social welfare issues facing migrants, asylum seekers, and tenant farmers, including housing shortages, health inequality, and economic development policies. As with the TISS program, this exchange is designed to maximize interaction and learning between students from Hong Kong, China, the U.S., and elsewhere, through a range of formal curricular, field-oriented, and informal interactions, and to leverage the
comparative perspective such an exchange might provide to think critically about social work practice and social welfare.

SSA, with our counterparts at Peking University, co-sponsored and hosted a scholarly seminar and strategic planning workshop in June 2012 with support from the University of Chicago's recently established Beijing Center. The seminar explored international perspectives on social policy and urban problems. It brought together scholars from China, the United States, India, and South Korea to also explore knowledge about, policy responses to, and enduring questions focused on urbanization and globalization across particular substantive themes—education, health, children and youth, and poverty and development—as they are playing out across these four national contexts. Following the seminar, a strategic planning workshop was held to discuss the possibilities for both dyadic and multilateral exchanges and institutional relationships among participating institutions. The seminar and workshop were grounded in our developing relationship with PKU and were expanded to include key relationships and potential partnerships with two other peer social work schools in other parts of Asia, TISS in India, and Seoul National University in South Korea. A follow-up workshop was held in 2014 and another in June 2015 in Mumbai, India.

Further galvanizing our efforts is the Collaborative Exchange Program, launched in 2016, which establishes an endowed joint social work educational exchange program in partnership with PKU and Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Working together, the three universities seek to promote the development of graduate social work education and research in China; facilitate international collaborative graduate education and research among the participating universities; and improve the quality of social work education in China, promoting a rigorously professionalized, effective, and ethical social work workforce and service system. Initially, the Collaborative Exchange Program will establish a Visiting Fellows Exchange Program that will provide a platform for distinguished scholars to hold lectures and seminars, and to carry out intensive study to engage in meaningful cross-national and cross-university exchanges. The program also will host an International Study Exchange Program for master’s and Ph.D. students that develops professional and academic leaders who further professionalize the social work field within China, and establish enduring institutional cross-national partnerships.

In addition to these developing relationships, the presence of the University of Chicago’s Beijing Center and the recent opening of the University’s Center in Delhi open exciting opportunities to provide continued support for ongoing cross-national exchanges, seminars, and conferences, including hosting students and scholars from China, India, the United States, and other countries for varying periods of time.

GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF THE SSA MASTER’S CURRICULUM

The SSA curriculum promotes social justice through its commitment to pluralism, rigorous inquiry, engaged interdisciplinary scholarship, integrative practice, critical thinking, and informed action. These curricular commitments prepare students to understand the complex contexts and power structures that maintain and reproduce inequality and injustice, and to take action to promote individual, social, and structural change.

1. Social Justice

SSA supports students to analyze the social, historical, political, economic, and organizational factors that reinforce inequity and injustice. Students and faculty consider their own and others’ positionality within those structures, with an appreciation of how identities and affiliations may intersect to compound or mitigate privilege and oppression. We work to increase access, opportunity, and agency in order to dismantle systems of oppression and to help meet the basic needs of diverse individuals, families, and communities with compassion and humaneness.

2. Intellectual Pluralism

Intellectual pluralism is at the heart of SSA’s teaching. The curriculum reflects the intellectual diversity of our faculty, who come from an array of academic disciplines and professions and represent a variety of political perspectives. This pluralism allows our students and faculty to appreciate multiple ways of knowing, to be critical of what counts as knowledge and research, and to be more inclusive of perspectives that have not traditionally been centered in social work curricula. Our intellectual pluralism also encourages ongoing interrogation of the concept of social justice, which is central to the mission of social work. It also provides us with the tools and flexibility to engage effectively with a broad range of individuals, communities, and social institutions.

3. Engaged Scholarship and Teaching

SSA faculty are committed to promoting social justice and social equality through engaged scholarship and education. Scholarship at SSA emerges from interactive engagement with practitioners, policy makers, and communities. SSA faculty members actively integrate their research into curricula and teaching. Students are educated to identify and analyze the causes, consequences of, and approaches to ameliorating human suffering and social injustice.

4. Integrative Practice
Our curriculum is built on the assumption that all social workers need to understand and act to mobilize change with and within individuals, families, communities, organizations, public institutions, and political and economic systems. Drawing upon and integrating field and classroom experiences, students will develop skills to practice across multiple levels. In addition, students are trained to use integrative frameworks that move beyond the micro-macro dichotomy.

5. Critical Thinking

Students learn to effectively question, assess, evaluate, and respond to assumptions, claims, and values, including those from social science and social work research. Students learn to consider a range of perspectives; carefully assess their assumptions, validity, and implications; and become skilled and insightful evaluators of their own thinking. This process includes reflection on how one’s own affiliations and identities may lead to blind spots and biases. Students learn to integrate a critical sensibility into practice so as to make meaningful contributions to the profession, the client base, and to the analysis and resolution of social problems.

GOALS OF THE SCHOOL

Carrying out SSA’s mission to enrich human life through scholarship, education, and service dedicated toward advancing a more socially just and humane society, we tackle the most intractable and costly of social problems by developing rigorous knowledge and rigorously trained professionals, as well as by leading and informing the field in ways that advance our society and the concerns of those who are most vulnerable. In keeping with its mission, the School’s goals are:

• To educate competent and effective professionals able to apply clinical, analytical, and organizational knowledge and skills to solve social problems and relieve the distress of vulnerable individuals through ethical practice in a rapidly changing global environment. This requires a learning environment that models respect for diversity and lifelong learners who can think critically about the world around them.
• To produce scholarship that enhances our understanding of the nature and sources of problems of individuals, families, communities, and society and of effective means of preventing and intervening with those problems.
• And to use the School’s resources to advance social justice and to serve its immediate community and the field of social welfare through the translation of knowledge into action. We aim to provide leadership both institutionally and through the efforts of individual faculty.

Graduates of the School of Social Service Administration should be able:

• To understand that the foundation of effective service lies in a grasp of the environment. Individual distress occurs in a social context involving the interaction of biological, psychological, familial, economic, community, and cultural factors.
• To understand that theories supported by empirical evidence serve as conceptual frameworks for examining individual distress, organizational functioning, community contexts, and social policies. These theories are drawn from multiple disciplines and become the foundation for a coherent framework from which to respond to human needs and promote social justice.
• To think critically and challenge the underlying assumptions, core values, conceptual frameworks, and evidence on which our professional knowledge is based.
• To engage in competent, ethical, and effective social work, clinical practice, or social administration.
• And to become effective leaders in the fields of social work and social welfare.