



Teaching Note - Sport Social Work: The Maize & Blueprint

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The systematic development of sport social work at the University of Michigan School of Social Work (UM-SSW) began in 2012 and continues to grow. The use of sport as an intervention taught in social work curricula and field education is becoming more available for students interested in training as sport social workers. This article will review and discuss key ways that social work and sport intersect. Utilizing a social justice lens, we will describe the innovative approaches used to create and build social work and sport field placements for master social work students at the University of Michigan and identify possible future directions for sport social work areas of training and practice.

Keywords: social work, social work education, field education, sport

In the article, “Jane Addams’ Forgotten Legacy: Recreation and Sport”, Reynolds (2017) detailed how Jane Addams recognized the potential benefits of integrating social work and sport, and her work as a sport social worker. As early as 1910, Addams concluded that participation in sport provided many protective factors, including an opportunity to enhance personal growth, facilitate relationship building and establish a positive direction for individuals, families, and the community. A variety of sports were offered at Hull House including many that were culturally important to immigrant populations. Through weekly competitive clubs for children and adults, organized sports were available regardless of any ability to pay-to-play. Furthermore, Addams created a youth sport social work certificate, and what may have been the first sport social work

field training program. Today, Addams' visionary work can be viewed through the lens of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DE&I), which is now integral to social work education and practice. The principles of DE&I were influential in building the UM-SSW sport social work program.

Like Addams, Nelson Mandela also recognized the power of sport as an intervention that could positively impact millions of lives. He used rugby, a sport loved by both Black and White South Africans, as one way to unite a racially divided country. The successful collaboration between Mandela and the elite, all White rugby team, resulted in major progress in uniting the population, and began the process for Black citizens to realize DE&I and access full participation in South African society. Mandela famously said:

Sport has the power to change the world. It has the power to inspire. It has the power to unite people in a way that little else does. It speaks to youth in a language they understand. Sport can create hope where once there was only despair. It is more powerful than governments in breaking down racial barriers. It laughs in the face of all types of discrimination. (Fraser, 2021)

The Intersection of Social Work Values and Ethics and Sport

As a profession based on values, ethics, knowledge and skills while using a holistic approach, social workers are uniquely positioned to provide counseling and support to athletes, coaches, families, and other sport staff. Social workers may also use their knowledge and skills to develop programs utilizing sport as an intervention to facilitate resilience, emotional well-being, and equity of access to sport programs. The ethical principles of the social work profession are based on the core values of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence, which are the cornerstones of the profession’s ethical standards (NASW, 2021). In their book *Sport Social Work: Promoting the functioning and well-being of college and professional athletes*, Moore and Gummelt (2018) described these six core values in relation to sport and coaching. We provide further examination of the intersection between the values, skills and ethics of social work and sport, and why sport social work should be an essential element of social work curriculum (see Table 1).

Table 1.
Intersection of social work values and sport

Social Work Value	Social Work Ethical Principles	Social Work Skills	Social Justice Skill Developed through Sport
Service	A social workers primary goal is to help people in need and to address social problems.	Social workers must see the bigger picture. Success is measured by what they do for others, including communities and society. The ability to effectively collaborate with others is essential.	Provides enhanced opportunities to engage and support marginalized individuals, groups and communities. Stresses the importance of teamwork and collaboration.

Social Justice	Social workers challenge social injustice.	Social workers need to be able to effectively function with uncertainty and discomfort. Social workers must persist in challenging social injustice at the micro, mezzo and macro levels.	Provides social workers the opportunity to address systemic injustice, develops resilience in the face of challenges and the importance of never giving up. Teaches how to respond to failure, learn from mistakes, and to function within discomfort/anxiety.
Dignity and Worth of the Person	Social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person.	Social workers see the value and strengths in every person, every community.	Sport can provide access to everyone. Teaches how to value and respect what each member of the team is able to contribute. Recognizes that everyone’s contributions determine success. Teaches respect for opponents, referees, coaches, etc.
Importance of human relationships	Social Workers recognize the central importance of human relationships.	Social workers consider multiple perspectives, engage and build rapport with clients and communities. Social workers operate from a strengths-based perspective and must be willing to have difficult conversations. They see the value and importance of every person.	Sport is all about relationships, working together, and learning from and with people from diverse backgrounds. The best teams create a common goal, and learn to value and depend on each other. The best coaches build a team using a strengths-based approach and constructive feedback to enhance skills, and invest in their players.
Integrity	Social workers behave in a trustworthy manner.	Social workers often have the lives of others in their hands and must act with integrity, follow through, and maintain appropriate boundaries to protect their clients.	Teaches integrity, the importance of fair play, and to play within the rules. Teaches the importance of DE&I. Emphasizes team/community as the “noble cause.”
Competence	Social Workers practice within their areas of competence and develop and enhance their professional expertise.	Social workers must continually self-reflect and think critically. They must be integrative and lifelong learners.	Teaches us to always work to improve even when we have success. It teaches us to adapt, adjust and reflect. It involves integrative and lifelong

learning.

Social justice is the lens through which all aspects of social work is conducted. Social workers are taught to consistently challenge social injustice at micro, mezzo, and macro levels. At the community level, this includes working to create equal access and inclusion in organized sports in geographic areas where programs and resources may not exist. In order to be effective, social workers need to build skills in resiliency, persistence, and the ability to function effectively in the face of opposition and discomfort. The opportunity for social work influence in sport can be seen in what we learn from sports. This includes building skills in resiliency to face challenges even when those challenges seem insurmountable. Like social work, sports teaches us how to respond to failure, learn from mistakes, and perform in uncomfortable situations. Sport gives social workers the opportunity to both build their own skills to challenge social injustice, and also provides a mechanism to enter communities and build these same skills in youth and young adults. Sport is a logical connection where the skill sets, mindsets, and heart sets of social workers can influence players, coaches, families, and communities to work toward enhancing wellness, building unity and trust, and producing socially just change.

Sport Social Work Program Development: The Blueprint

The sport social work initiative at the UM-SSW was influenced by the work of Jane Addams and the work and words of Nelson Mandela. Through a series of discussions, faculty teachers of field education (field faculty) identified how their work intersected seamlessly with social work values, ethics, knowledge and skills, and offered an opportunity to develop sport social work as a deliberate intervention to be used with individuals, teams, families, and the community. Field faculty concluded that in order to bring sport social work training to the classroom and internships, integration of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) competencies would be essential. While all CSWE competencies need to be addressed in a sport social work internship and were included in program development, the following competencies were emphasized in developing the blueprint. These included: Advance Human Rights and Social and Economic Justice (#3), Assessment of Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations, and Communities (#7), Evaluate Practice With Individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations and Communities (#9), Engage in Practice-Informed Research and Research-Informed Practice (#4), Intervene with individuals, Families, Groups, Organizations and Communities (#8), Engagement With Individuals, Families, and Communities (#6). Integration of Social Work Values and Ethics as noted above, were also at the core of blueprint, course and internship development.

The **SOCIAL JUSTICE** inspiration for the UM-SSW sport social work program came from the work of Jane Addams and Nelson Mandela and became a cornerstone in developing sport social work education, including internships. In determining agencies for potential internship sites, the following criteria was emphasized: A commitment to teaching participants about the importance of Diversity, Equity and Inclusion (DE&I) through their sport programs; having the capacity to provide appropriate social work supervision; and having available learning activities to help students develop competency-based, sport related knowledge, skills, values and attitudes to meet CSWE and UM-SSW educational requirements.

Initial **ASSESSMENT** of student interest in sport social work consisted of sending a survey email to 900 UM-SSW students. Field faculty received 120 responses (13.3% of the student body) expressed interest in sport social work. Follow up meetings with field faculty and students were held to discuss opportunities for sport social work training. Students formed a

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faculty study group to assess overall faculty interest. Discussions with the study group served as an opportunity to educate senior faculty about the potential benefits and relevance of sport social work. As a result, faculty and students determined using sport as an intervention could be incorporated into the curriculum and meet CSWE, and UM-SSW educational requirements.

EVALUATION for the sport social work program development included field faculty and students reviewing the results of the assessment of email responses and the feedback from the student/faculty study group. With 120 students interested in sport social work and with a key faculty suggestion that students plan a sport social work educational event, students formed the Social Work and Sport Association (SWAS) and developed the first educational sport social work workshop. Feedback from those attending the event was positive, indicating interest in additional educational programs.

The initial social work and sport educational event was the first **INTERVENTION** and included students and field faculty assembling a panel of experts in the area using sport as an intervention. Panelists included SSW faculty, a psychology professor, SSW field faculty, a community sport social work practitioner, and a student who had a background in college-level and professional sports. Based on the positive participant feedback from this two-hour panel presentation, the SWAS group developed a national, half-day conference, with presenters from four universities around the country. Participant feedback was positive and field faculty focused on ways to incorporate sport social work into the UM-SSW curriculum. Field faculty created a proposal, which was accepted by UM-SSW administration, to develop a two-day, sport social work course within the SSW Continuing Education Department for practicing social workers. The course was then modified to create a one-credit introductory sport social work class for incoming UM-SSW students. Both courses focused on how sport could be integrated into social work and lead to careers in this emerging practice area. Furthermore, the continuing education course provided an opportunity to promote the creation of sport social work field placements to practicing social work professionals who could serve as field instructors. The UM-SSW has continued to support sport social work by offering in-person, synchronous and asynchronous presentations and outreach to agencies in order to develop and maintain sport social work field placements.

Several evidenced-based **RESEARCH** studies, addressing both protective and risk factors associated with participation in organized sports, were important to program development. A comprehensive report from the LifeSport program at The Ohio State University, examined protective aspects of youth sport participation. The Aspen Institute *Project Play* has provided data and information on youth participation in sports since 2013 (Aspen Institute, Project Play, 2013). Finally, from a more recent presentation titled, “Foundation of Sport Social Work”, the presenters asserted that athletes can be considered a vulnerable population, and subject to increased risk of developing behavioral and other mental health issues as a result of sport participation (Driesenga et al., 2021). It is important research in the area of sport social work continues, expanding the body of knowledge and enhancing education in the classroom and internships.

ENGAGEMENT was a key component at every stage of development of the practice area. The sport social work development team applied social work competencies of assessment, intervention and evaluation creating a feedback and engagement loop for field faculty and students. Engagement with other UM-SSW faculty, the Office of Student Services, and administrative leaders was essential to attain full integration of sport social work into the UM-SSW curriculum.

With the blueprint established and with sport recognized within the UM-SSW as a viable intervention, field faculty intensified outreach to agencies and programs that were possible internship sites. Field faculty used the standard UM-SSW agency internship approval process in developing sport social work internships.

Challenges

Many challenges emerged during the process of developing sport social work as a practice area. First, despite considerable anecdotal evidence, there was limited empirical literature available to support the efficacy of sport as an intervention in social work practice, nor was there evidence that students would want to train using sport as an intervention. Recognizing the limited availability of practicum sites to train students in sport social work was another challenge. Additionally, the student-led Social Work and Sport Association (SWAS) struggled to raise funds to cover costs associated with developing the first national conference on sport social work. Finally, accreditation standards requiring social work interns to receive supervision from licensed social workers (LMSW) hampered collaborations between the UM-SSW and sport organizations without an LMSW on staff.

From a social justice perspective, we also recognized that significant barriers exist with regard to access to sport participation. Access to facilities, playing fields, sports leagues, coaching, and competition are heavily influenced by systemic racism and other socioeconomic factors. In a nutshell, participating in sports in today's world is expensive and time consuming. Creating equitable access to opportunity for participation must be a critical focus of sport social workers to optimally use sport as an intervention.

Overall, field faculty applied the processes of assessment, intervention and evaluation as a way to address challenges and develop plans to problem solve. In this way, challenges created opportunity and had a positive effect on program development. We believe it is critical for champions of sport social work to continue efforts to collaborate with students, faculty, administrators, researchers, and community partners to develop internship opportunities for social work student training. Through these efforts, sport social work has the potential to further develop integrative practice approaches that become essential components of social work curriculum.

Future Directions

Sport Social Work offers a timely and unique approach to address wellbeing among youth, adults, and older adults, as well as opportunities for applying strength-based interventions in coaching and for parents of athletes. As the field of sport social work continues to evolve, social workers and social work students will be able to expand the reach and scope of their practice to include settings and challenges that are unique to coaches, parents, and athletes. Furthermore, social workers can use sports as an avenue to address inequity and social injustices by building community partnerships and engaging with underserved, marginalized, oppressed communities thereby leveling the playing field in terms of accessing organized sport opportunities. This may include outreach and collaboration with agencies working with youth; seniors; collegiate; and professional athletic teams; sports-focused training camps; community centers; adventure therapy; and leadership training with coaches and athletic departments.

In moving in this direction, it is important to grow community partnerships which allows social workers to increase their engagement in sport program development and mental health support for coaches and athletes. This includes working in marginalized communities to address stigma associated with mental health problems and traditional therapeutic approaches, as well as to restore interest and create sport opportunities. Furthermore, it is important to integrate sport social work into the SSW curriculum by developing field placement internships and additional sport social work courses to support students in developing advanced competency in this practice area. Social work students must also develop collaborative practice skills needed to effectively work with coaches, parents, and communities to support their efforts to assist athletes in managing stress levels, addressing grief and loss after injuries, and transitioning at the end of their careers.

Schools of social work interested in developing sport social work programs may conduct assessments of student and faculty interest and the extent to which their local communities can offer sport and recreational programs for youth, adults and seniors as well as those that can offer student internships. Furthermore, at agencies not having appropriate MSW supervision, it is essential that SSW field faculty and agency staff identify a MSW to be part of the required weekly supervision. Additionally, SSW programs can support students in developing student-led sport social work organizations.

Since the inception of the sport social work practice area in 2012, many graduates have gone on to work as sport social workers from urban to rural areas and from college campuses to community centers. It is hoped that the synergistic process among faculty, students and community agencies that led to the development of the UM-SSW sport social work program can be replicated at other schools of social work, adding to the growing body of knowledge of sport social work and in the tradition of Jane Addams and Nelson Mandela.

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