



**Faculty Perceptions of Professional Licensure: Implications for Social Work Education**

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## Faculty Perceptions of Professional Licensure: Implications for Social Work Education

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*Linnea F. GlenMaye and Brien L. Bolin*

In 1989, Cherry, Rothman, and Skolnik presented findings of the first national study on the issues and dilemmas of social work licensure in an era of increasing implementation of licensure and certification among the states. They reported that, in 1988, 31 states used at least one of the examinations at the BSW, MSW, and advanced levels. Today, every state, along with the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands, legally regulates the practice of social work (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013; Thyer, 2002). Licensure regulations vary greatly throughout the states and jurisdictions, but the use of exams is almost universal, with the vast majority of states choosing to use the exams provided by the Association of Social Work Boards (ASWB), a private consumer protection group founded in 1979 (Thyer, 2011). In 1989, when Cherry et al. studied the issue, ASWB (then AASSWB) offered three levels of licensure: basic, intermediate, and advanced. Today, ASWB offers five levels of exams: Associate, Bachelors, Masters, Advanced Generalist, and Clinical (Thyer, 2011). The clinical level is the most frequently regulated level of practice, with all states requiring clinical social workers to be licensed (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2013), but 38 states have multi-level licensure that includes the BSW level (ASWB, 2013). Regulation by the states has produced a confusing patchwork of licensing regulations, beginning with a bewildering list of 41 different designations for social work license titles (Social Work Reinvestment Initiative, 2008).

Professional licensure in social work has had a somewhat controversial history, with passionate and vigorous debate over the merits of licensure, the validity of license exams, and the relationship between licensure and social work education and curricula (Cherry, Rothman, & Skolnik, 1989; Cohen & Deri, 1992; Iversen, 1987; Marson, DeAngelis, & Mittal, 2010; Seidl, 2002; Randall & Thyer, 1994; Thyer, 2002, 2011; Wynn & Thyer,

1996). Throughout this era of debate, social work license pass rates have hovered in the 70% range with the exception of the Advanced Generalist exam, which has posted lower pass rates in the 50% range. As of 2009, ASWB reported that the national pass rates were 77.3% for BSW, 74% for MSW, 58.3% for Advanced Generalist, and 75.9% for Clinical (ASWB, 2008). The pass rates for 2012 (ASWB, 2012) have been recently published by ASWB, with a 77.1% pass rate for Bachelors, an 83.6% pass rate for Masters, a 63.3% pass rate for Advanced Generalist, and a 76.8% pass rate for Clinical.

The 1989 study by Cherry et al. found that faculty are unfamiliar with license exam content and that only 22% of respondents reported that the licensure exam had an impact on curricula. Twenty years later, Thyer (2011) indicates that social work education has largely ignored the importance of the licensing examination and that pass rates should be tied to social work program effectiveness, even suggesting that pass rates could be made a condition of accreditation. The reliability and validity of the ASWB examinations have been much debated, but there has been little published research on the exam itself. Thyer (2011) is critical of the lack of information regarding license pass rates from ASWB and from schools of social work.

In light of the steady trend of decreasing pass rates, the issue of licensure is both important and pressing, and raises questions for a sustainable future for social work education and the profession. There is, however, little empirical research on license exam issues and the relationship of licensure to social work education. The 1989 study by Cherry et al. addressed many issues that remain controversial and significant in the current educational climate. The goal of this study is explore the current state of knowledge, attitudes, and practices related to licensure among social

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work faculty. Areas explored include mandated licensing of social work faculty, the relationship of the curriculum to the license exam, and the importance of licensure for social work education. Relationships among various variables were explored, including faculty knowledge of the exam, area of teaching, and whether faculty were licensed in relationship to attitudes toward the importance of the exam to the curriculum and mandatory licensure of faculty.

### Methods

#### Design

This descriptive and exploratory study used an online survey method. Survey Monkey© was used for instrument development and data collection. The data were drawn from the web-based survey using a convenience sample of members of the BPD-L Listserv, the MSW-ED Listserv, and the KSWE (Kansas Social Work Educators) listserv. Two rounds of mail requests were sent to the listserv with an invitation to participate in the survey. If respondents clicked on the e-mail link they were directed to Survey Monkey©. They were provided with a consent letter describing the study, how they were chosen, the risks and benefits, and information about the researchers and their right to withdraw. If they chose to participate, they clicked “yes” and they were taken to the first question of the survey; if they declined to participate they were taken to an exit page with information about the authors. This study was approved for research involving human subjects by the University Institutional Review Board at the authors’ institution.

#### Survey Instrument

Many of the items in the survey instrument were drawn from the issues addressed in the Cherry et al. study (1989), but the authors added additional items to further explore faculty knowledge and attitudes. Items included on the survey were a combination of closed-ended and open-ended questions and contained five major sections: respondent characteristics, knowledge of the licensing exam, the importance/relevancy of licensure for social work education, perceptions of the impact of the license exam on curriculum and teaching, and perceptions of how licensure affects stu-

dents. Most items included a space for respondents to comment or provide additional choices for their response.

Characteristics of the respondent’s institution were gathered (state where located, public or private, size, social work degrees offered, licensure related activities provided to students, and licensure-related advising provided to students). Demographic information about the respondent were collected (years of teaching experience, type of position, tenure status, primary teaching area of teaching, and academic rank/title). Respondents were asked about their knowledge and experiences with licensure (if they had taken the exam, if they had taken it multiple times, level of license held, years licensed, license eligibility, reason for not being licensed, the license exam’s effects on their own teaching, and respondent’s knowledge of licensure levels in their state of residence).

Knowledge and beliefs about the license exam were explored with several items. From a list of ten possible reasons, respondents were asked to identify the top three reasons students fail the license and, from the same list, the least important reason why students fail the license exam; from a list of five items, respondents were asked to choose the best method for gate keeping for the social work profession. Another item asked respondents to estimate the national pass rates for four types of licensure (BSW, LMSW, Clinical Licensure, and Advanced Generalist). Pass rates were chosen from the nominal categories of less than 50%, 51-60%, 61-70%, 71-80%, 81-90%, or 91-100%. Then, using the same categories, respondents were asked to estimate pass rates for their own program.

The last section of the online survey explored faculty attitudes and perceptions toward licensure using a five-point Likert scale from strongly disagree to strongly agree. The 26 items focused on various facets of the licensing exam and its relationship to social work education, including:

- The social work educator’s familiarity with licensing requirements (for example, *I am familiar with social work license requirements nationally; I am familiar with the contents of the license exam*).

- The importance of licensure for social work education (for example, *Licensure is an important issue for social work education; All social work educators should be required to hold a current social work license*).
- The relationship of the exam to program quality, curriculum, and teaching (for example, *Providing data on license exam pass rates should be a required part of program accreditation; The social work curriculum should prepare students to successfully pass the license exam; The license examinations help to improve the quality of social work education; The content of the license exam is a good reflection of the social work curriculum; The license exam has an impact on decisions to add new courses to my program's curriculum*).
- The relationship of the exam to preparation for the professional practice (for example, *The license exam is an important part of quality control for the profession; Social work education should work closely with ASWB to develop the licensing exam*).
- Mandatory licensure of social work faculty (for example, *Social work educators who teach practice should be required to hold a current social work license; All social work educators should be required to hold a current social work license*).
- Student issues and concerns about licensure (for example, *Students bear the ultimate responsibility for license exam preparation; Social work students are highly anxious about taking the license exam; Social work programs should provide license exam preparation to students*).

#### Data Analysis

Preliminary analysis of the data was conducted using the tools for frequencies and cross tabulations on the Survey Monkey<sup>®</sup> website. Website data were then exported into PWAS (SPSS) 18 for further analysis. Descriptive statistics and tests of association (Chi-Square) were used to report characteristics of faculty and their views of licensure.

Two open ended questions asked for com-

ments on the decline in ASWB pass rates over the past several years and any additional comments on the issue of licensure. Open-ended responses were not systematically analyzed, but comments that yielded insights are reported in the findings.

### Findings

#### Demographic findings

**Institutional characteristics.** Of the respondents, 66% (n = 225) were from public universities and 34% (n = 117) were from private universities. The largest proportion of respondents were from institutions under 5,000 students (31%, n = 106); followed by institutions with 10,000-19,999 students (26%, n = 90); institutions with 5,000-9,999 students (20%, n = 67); institutions with 20,000-29,999 students (11%, n = 39) and institutions over 30,000 (11%, n = 39). Respondents were from 47 states. Texas led in total number of respondents (n = 27, 7.8%), followed by Pennsylvania (n = 26, 7.2%), Kansas (n = 22, 6.1%), Kentucky (n = 17, 4.7%), and Indiana (n = 16, 4.4%). Minnesota, New York, and Ohio each had 15 respondents (4.2%) of the sample each. Fully 94% (n = 321) of the respondents were in programs that offered BSW degrees, and 32% (n = 107) in programs that offered MSW degrees, while less than 1% (n = 1) were in programs that offered a doctorate.

**Faculty status.** Sixty-one percent of respondents (n = 209) were full time faculty. Approximately 24% (n = 81) were deans or administrators and 8% (n = 27) were field practicum administrators. Of the respondents, 33% were associate professors (n = 114), 25% were assistant professors (n = 86), 22% were full professors (n = 76), and 12% were adjuncts lecturers and instructors (n = 41). Forty-nine percent (n = 167) of the respondents were tenured, while 51% (n = 172) were not tenured. Of those reporting they were not tenured, 52% were in a tenure-track position (n = 70). The average length of time as a social work educator was almost 15 years ( $M = 14.6$ ,  $SD = 9.7$ ), and experience ranged from less than one year to 47 years.

The largest number of respondents were teaching in the area of direct practice (34%, n = 113), followed by 16% (n = 54) in field education, 15% (n = 49) in research, 11% (n = 38) in the area of

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social welfare policy, and 7% in HBSE, with 8% teaching in “other” areas.

*Faculty licensed to practice.* Seventy percent of respondents had taken a licensing exam ( $n = 236$ ) and a corresponding 30% ( $n = 102$ ) had not taken an exam. Of respondents who are licensed, the average number of years licensed was about 18 years ( $M = 17.8$  years,  $SD = 8.6$ ). Ninety-five percent of those who were licensed had taken the exam once only. Of those who had taken the exam, 42% were licensed at the clinical level ( $n = 141$ ), while 22% ( $n = 74$ ) held the LMSW (intermediate level) license. Of those who were not licensed, 76% ( $n = 68$ ) were license-eligible in their state, while 10% ( $n = 9$ ) indicated they were unsure about license eligibility. Of those not licensed, the number one reason for not seeking the license was that it was not needed to teach (47%,  $n = 44$ ). However, 22% said the reason for not seeking licensure was concern about passing the exam, 12% said that it was not important, and 7% said too much effort was required. Thirty-two percent ( $n = 30$ ) of those who had not taken the licensing exam provided “other” explanations for not having taken the exam, which they provided in the comment section. One respondent said, “When [I was in] in practice [I] did not need [to be licensed] as an administrator and division head in state and local government.” Another said, “Keep in mind that licensing varies widely from state to state. In this state the only meaningful license is LCSW.” One respondent’s comment was, “I have no use for that as a Generalist Social Work Educator.” Another respondent said, “When I earned my MSW in the 1990’s and entered macro practice, I didn’t need licensure. Now I see more macro jobs requiring licensure, especially if supervision is required.”

### Licensure-Related Activities in Social Work Programs

Respondents were asked “What licensure-related activities does your program provide to students?” Ninety-one percent of respondents ( $n = 275$ ) said that their programs provided information about the process for obtaining a social work license. About one third of respondents said their programs provide information on passing rates of graduates of their programs ( $n = 97$ ). One-third

also provide test preparation material in their school or library ( $n = 100$ ), and one-third provide links to license material and resources on the school’s website (34%,  $n = 103$ ). Sixty-three percent ( $n = 200$ ) of respondents said they had discussed licensing requirements in their classes.

### License Exam Passing and Failure

Participants were asked to provide their best estimate of the national pass rates for BSW, LMSW, Clinical Licensure at the MSW level, and Advanced Generalist MSW Level. Participants were also asked what pass rate would be acceptable for their own students. Without exception, respondents tended to choose an acceptable pass rate for graduates of their own programs that were higher than their estimate for the national pass rate. For example, 47% ( $n = 125$ ) of respondents estimated the national LBSW pass rates were in the range of 71-80%, while 46% ( $n = 128$ ) believed that an acceptable rate for their own BSW graduates would be 81-90%. See Table 1 for responses for all four levels of licensure.

Respondents were asked to identify the top three reasons (from a list of ten) for failing the licensing exam. Of respondents, 50% ( $n = 140$ ) chose *the student is not a good test taker* as the first, second, or third choice. Another 35% ( $n = 98$ ) said that *students did not have enough experience with objective exams* and 34% ( $n = 94$ ) said that programs were *admitting students who are not capable*. Comments to this question provided some additional insights. One respondent said, “The exam content does not necessarily mirror the knowledge and skills required by CSWE and my school and I do not believe in teaching to the exam.” Another stated, “The exam seems to not consider the content of EPAS when creating the questions, it also asks too many questions that ask what you do in order of priority which students are stumped on.” One respondent said, “Students think that because they did ok or well in classes that they do not need to study for the licensure exam. As a result, the students may not pass despite being advised to study and prepare.” Finally, the least important reasons for not passing were that *the exam is too hard* (23%,  $n = 62$ ), *grade inflation* (17%,  $n = 47$ ), and *quality of the faculty* (17%,  $n = 45$ ).

Table 1

*Faculty Estimates for the National Pass Rates for Levels of Licensure and Acceptable Rates for their Own Graduates*

Level of Licensure	Faculty Perception of:	Less than 50%	51-60%	61-70%	71-80%	81-90%	91-100%	Total Response
BSW	National Pass Rate	3% n = 8	9% n = 25	21% n = 58	<b>46%</b> n = <b>125</b>	17% n = 47	4% n = 10	273
	Acceptable Pass Rate in Your Program	1% n = 2	1.5% n = 4	3% n = 9	26% n = 72	<b>49%</b> n = <b>128</b>	23% n = 65	280
LMSW	National Pass Rate	7% n = 19	1% n = 2	21% n = 56	<b>44%</b> n = <b>117</b>	23% n = 62	2% n = 6	266
	Acceptable Pass Rate in Your Program	.5% n = 1	1% n = 2	3% n = 5	25% n = 49	<b>49%</b> n = <b>94</b>	22% n = 43	194
Clinical Licensure at the MSW Level	National Pass Rate	10% n = 27	2% n = 4	27% n = 76	<b>35%</b> n = <b>98</b>	20% n = 56	4% n = 10	278
	Acceptable Pass Rate in Your Program	1.5% n = 3	2% n = 4	2% n = 4	23% n = 45	<b>50%</b> n = <b>98</b>	21% n = 42	196
Advanced Generalist at the MSW Level	National Pass Rate	9% n = 21	9% n = 25	25% n = 58	<b>37%</b> n = <b>87</b>	20% n = 47	5% n = 12	235
	Acceptable Pass Rate in Your Program	2% n = 3	1% n = 1	4% n = 6	21% n = 34	<b>53%</b> n = <b>85</b>	20% n = 33	162

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### Gatekeeping and Licensure

In response to a question asking about the best way to provide gatekeeping for the profession, the most frequently chosen response was *admissions policies* (36%, n = 124); the second most frequent response was *licensing exams* (20%, n = 68), and the third most frequent response was *graduation from accredited programs* (16%, n = 54). The least frequently chosen response was *building strong relationships with students and counseling out when necessary* (2%, n = 5). About 11% of respondents chose “other” and provided their own view of the best way to provide gatekeeping. Comments were varied with no particular theme

emerging, but several respondents did comment further on admissions as a way to provide gatekeeping. One comment captures the essence of a common viewpoint, “Programs need to take seriously their obligations to admit students who will be successful. Some MSW programs will admit anyone who can graduate from a BSW program and not all graduates are equal.”

### Attitudes Toward Licensure

Faculty attitudes and beliefs about licensure were explored with 26 items that used a five-point Likert scale, from *strongly disagree* to *strongly agree* with *undecided* at the mid-point. The frequencies and percentages of how faculty respond-

Table 2

*Familiarity with Licensing Requirements by Licensed and Nonlicensed Faculty*

Items	Faculty Licensed Yes or No	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree	n	df	N	$\chi^2$
I am familiar with social work license requirements nationally.	Yes	5% (10)	25% (54)	11% (23)	43% (94)	18% (39)	220	4	315	22.3***
	No	16% (15)	31% (29)	12% (11)	39% (37)	3% (3)	95			
I am familiar with social work license requirements in my state.	Yes	1% (2)	2% (4)	2% (4)	31% (69)	64% (143)	222	4	318	18.2***
	No	3% (3)	6% (6)	5% (5)	44% (42)	42% (40)	96			
I am familiar with the content of the social work license exam.	Yes	2% (4)	9% (19)	9% (19)	54% (119)	27.5% (61)	222	4	317	42.7***
	No	8% (8)	31% (29)	10% (9)	44% (42)	7% (7)	95			

\*\*\* p. < .001, \*\* p. < .01, \* p. < .05

ed to these items are reported along with chi-square analysis to test the association between licensed social work educators and those not licensed. Fourteen items revealed significant differences ( $p \leq .05$ ) between respondents who were licensed and those who were not licensed. Chi-square statistics for items with significant differences between licensed and nonlicensed respondents are reported in the tables in following sections. Unless noted, the findings are reported as agreement or disagreement, which is the sum of those who strongly agreed or agreed and those who strongly disagreed or disagreed.

#### **Familiarity with Licensing Requirements**

About 55% ( $n = 173$ ) of respondents agreed that they were *familiar with the national license requirements*. The vast majority of respondents agreed that they were *familiar with the requirements in their state* (92%,  $n = 294$ ). Over 70% of respondents agreed that they were *familiar with the content of the license exam* (72%,  $n = 229$ ). When respondents who were licensed were compared to those who were not licensed, responses on all three items revealed a significant difference. Faculty who were not licensed reported less familiarity with national requirements, state requirements, and content of the exam. See Table 2 for chi-square results.

#### **Relationship with ASWB**

Two items explored attitudes toward partnerships with ASWB, and findings revealed that respondents highly favor a closer relationship with ASWB:

- *Social work education should work closely with ASWB to develop the licensing exam* (agree = 81%,  $n = 255$ ).
- *Social work educators should work closely with state licensing boards to regulate social work practice* (agree = 81%,  $n = 255$ ).

There were no significant differences between licensed and nonlicensed faculty on these items.

#### **Licensure and Social Work Education**

Several items looked at the relationship between licensure and social work education. Respondents overwhelmingly agreed that licensure is an important issue for social work education (83%,  $n = 264$ ). However, there were significant

differences between licensed and nonlicensed respondents on this item, with nonlicensed respondents showing a little less agreement and higher numbers of undecided respondents.

Three items examined whether the social work curriculum should prepare students to pass the licensing exam. A large majority of respondents agreed with preparation for the BSW and MSW exams, but far fewer agreed with preparation for the clinical exam:

- *The social work curriculum should prepare students to successfully pass the BSW licensing exam* (agree = 69%,  $n = 216$ ).
- *The social work curriculum should prepare students to successfully pass the MSW licensing exam* (agree = 69%,  $n = 216$ ).
- *The social work curriculum should prepare students to successfully pass the clinical license exam* (agree = 50%,  $n = 162$ ).

Only one of the three items showed significant differences between licensed and unlicensed respondents: *the social work curriculum should prepare students to successfully pass the BSW licensing exam*. Unlicensed respondents were less likely to agree with this statement.

Respondents strongly supported the statement that *the content of the licensing exams should correspond with CSWE accreditation standards* (agree = 75%,  $n = 237$ ). There were mixed results, however, on whether *providing license exam pass rates should be part of program accreditation*, with 33% ( $n = 106$ ) disagreeing, 26% ( $n = 81$ ) undecided, and the remaining 41% ( $n = 130$ ) agreeing with the statement. Attitudes toward the statement that *license exam pass rates are a valid measure of social work program quality* also showed mixed results, with less than one-third (31%,  $n = 96$ ) of the respondents agreeing, while 41% ( $n = 130$ ) disagreed with the statement, and 28% ( $n = 86$ ) were uncertain. Less than one-third of respondents agreed that *the license exam helps to improve the quality of social work education* (30%,  $n = 94$ ), while 38% ( $n = 119$ ) disagreed with the statement, and 31% ( $n = 97$ ) were uncertain. Slightly over half of respondents agreed that *social work programs should provide license exam preparation to students* (53%,  $n = 168$ ).



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Slightly over 50% of respondents disagreed that the content of the license exam is a good reflection of the social work curriculum (51%, n = 139), while only 22% (n = 68) agreed with that statement, leaving the rest undecided (28%, n = 85). Respondents tended to disagree with the statement that the license exam helps to improve the quality of social work education (38%, n = 119), with 30% (n = 94) agreeing, and another 30% (n = 97) undecided. There was stronger unanimity on the statement that the license exam is an important

part of quality control for the profession, with 64% (n=202) agreeing, and 15% (n = 47) disagreeing, with 21% (n = 65) undecided. Respondents tended to agree that the license exam is a valid measure of beginning practice competence, but the results again are mixed, with 36% (n=113) agreeing, while 32% (n = 101) disagreed, and 31% (n = 97) were undecided. Significant differences between respondents who were licensed and those who were not licensed were found on responses to three items: The license exam is a valid measure of be-

Table 3

*Licensing Importance to Quality and Competence by Licensed and Nonlicensed Faculty*

Items	Faculty Licensed Yes or No	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree	n	N	df	$\chi^2$
The social work curriculum should prepare students to successfully pass the BSW license exam.	Yes	4% (8)	7% (15)	16% (35)	49% (108)	24% (53)	219	313	4	13.1**
	No	13% (12)	9% (8)	20% (19)	45% (42)	14% (13)	94			
The content of the license exam is a good reflection of the social work curriculum.	Yes	14% (31)	34% (74)	27% (60)	21% (45)	4% (9)	219	312	4	9.7*
	No	20% (19)	27% (25)	28% (35)	15% (14)	0% (0)	93			
The license exam is a valid measure of beginning practice competence.	Yes	8% (18)	22% (47)	27% (58)	37% (81)	6% (13)	217	311	4	20.8***
	No	17% (16)	21% (20)	42% (39)	20% (19)	0% (0)	94			
Licensure is an important issue for social work education.	Yes	2% (5)	2% (5)	5% (12)	46% (101)	45% (99)	222	318	4	30.9***
	No	6% (6)	15% (14)	13% (12)	41% (39)	26% (25)	96			
The license exam is an important part of quality control for the profession.	Yes	4% (8)	8% (17)	20% (43)	45% (98)	25% (54)	220	314	4	2.1**
	No	12% (11)	12% (11)	23% (22)	43% (40)	11% (10)	94			

\*\*\* p. < .001, \*\* p. < .01, \* p. < .05

Table 4

*License Exam Impact on Social Work Courses by Licensed or Unlicensed Faculty*

Items	Faculty Licensed Yes or No	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree	n	N	df	$\chi^2$
The license exam has an impact on required course content in my program's curriculum.	Yes	15% (32)	34% (75)	21% (45)	26% (57)	5% (10)	219	310	4	10.2*
	No	30% (27)	31% (28)	15% (14)	22% (20)	2% (2)	91			
The license exam has an impact on elective courses offered in my program's curriculum.	Yes	17% (38)	41% (90)	19% (42)	16% (35)	7% (15)	220	312	4	12.5**
	No	35% (32)	30% (28)	19% (17)	13% (12)	3% (3)	92			
The license exam has an impact on my teaching.	Yes	13% (28)	27% (59)	16% (34)	36% (79)	8% (18)	218	309	4	17.9***
	No	28% (25)	35% (32)	14% (13)	21% (19)	2% (2)	91			

\*\*\* p. < .001, \*\* p. < .01, \* p. < .05

ginning practice competence, the contents of the license exam is a good reflection of social work curriculum, and the license exam is an important part of quality control for the profession. See Table 3 for chi-square results on items related to the importance of licensure to quality and competence.

Four items looked at the impact of the license exam on courses. A large majority of respondents (60%, n = 187) disagreed that *the license exam has an impact on decisions to add new courses to their program's curriculum*. There were no significant differences between respondents who were licensed and those who were not licensed in responses to this statement. A slightly smaller majority (60%, n = 188) also disagreed with the statement that *the license exam has an impact on elec-*

*tive course content in their program's curriculum*, with 21% agreeing (n = 89) and 19% (n = 59) undecided. More than half of respondents disagreed with the statement that *the license exam has an impact on required course content in their program's curriculum* (52%, n = 162, with 29% (n = 89) agreeing, and 19% (n = 59) undecided. When asked to rate their agreement with this statement, *the license exam has an impact on my teaching*, the respondents who disagreed outnumbered those who agreed, as 47% (n = 144) disagreed with this statement and 34% (n = 118) agreed, with 15% (n = 47) undecided. There were significant differences between respondents who were licensed and those who were not licensed on these three statements, with nonlicensed faculty

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showing a higher tendency to disagree that the license exam has an impact on decisions to add new courses, on required course content, and on elective course content. See Table 4 for chi-square statistics on license exam impact on social work courses.

### Students and Licensure

Respondents were asked about two issues related to students, with both showing strong agreement. The vast majority (82%,  $n = 253$ ) agreed that *social work students are highly anxious about taking the license exam*, with only 7% ( $n = 23$ ) disagreeing, and 11% ( $n = 33$ ) undecided. The other question also elicited broad support, with 74% ( $n = 233$ ) agreeing that *students bear the ultimate responsibility for license exam preparation* (16%

disagreed or strongly disagreed,  $n = 50$ ).

Several respondents focused their comments regarding student failure on the licensing exam. One respondent said, "The exams often include content students are not taught nor required by CSWE standards. The exams are ambiguously worded and particularly hard for students for whom English is not a first language. The exams do not test beginning level expectations of social work competence." Another commented, "The exam does not reflect what CSWE requires for content in most cases. People who write test questions seem more focused on urban practice that does not reflect most of the country's rural environment." Another respondent said, "The licensing exam is a poor measure of academic progress

Table 5

### License Required for Faculty

Items	Faculty Licensed Yes or No	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Undecided	Agree	Strongly Agree	n	N	df	$\chi^2$
All social work educators should be required to hold a current social work license.	Yes	17% (38)	20% (43)	18% (40)	23% (50)	22% (48)	219	314	4	17.6**
	No	38% (36)	18% (17)	15% (14)	19% (18)	11% (11)	95			
Social work educators who teach practice should be required to hold a current social work license.	Yes	8% (18)	12% (26)	7% (16)	26% (57)	47% (104)	221	314	4	29.9***
	No	28% (26)	14% (13)	7% (6)	30% (28)	22% (20)	93			
Social work educators who teach field practicum should be required to hold a current social work license.	Yes	8% (18)	9% (19)	9% (19)	28% (60)	46% (100)	216	311	4	22.0***
	No	22% (21)	13% (12)	8% (8)	35% (33)	22% (21)	95			

\*\*\*  $p < .001$ , \*\*  $p < .01$ , \*  $p < .05$

in a social work program of study.” One respondent wrote, “The exam and CSWE required content often do not match. Faculty put emphasis on meeting accreditation standards.”

#### Faculty Licensure

Three items looked at attitudes toward faculty licensure and all three revealed significant differences between licensed and nonlicensed respondents. Respondents were about evenly divided between those who disagreed and those who agreed with the statement that *all social work educators should be required to hold a current social work license*, with 40% (n = 127) agreeing, while 43% (n = 134) disagreed, with 17% (n = 54) undecided. When the statement was changed to require *licensure for educators who teach practice*, the number of respondents who agreed increased markedly, with 67% agreeing (n = 209), with 26% (n = 83) disagreeing, and only 7% (n = 22) undecided. The numbers supporting the statement increased again when the statement read, *social work educators who teach field practicum should be required to hold a current social work license*. Sixty-nine percent of respondents agreed with this statement (n = 214), while 23% (n = 70) disagreed, and 9% (n = 27) were undecided. See Table 5 for chi-square statistics on faculty licensure.

#### Limitations of the Study

This study used an online survey to explore faculty attitudes and beliefs about licensure. A convenience sample of listserv members provided easy access to social work educators but was ultimately a limiting factor, as shown by the lack of respondents from programs that offered a doctoral degree. Respondents were from a wide variety of BSW and MSW programs, but the study’s findings are quite obviously limited by the sample characteristics. Over 300 responses provided interesting insights into faculty perceptions of licensure and its importance to social work education, but this study should be viewed as a snapshot of current views, with further studies needed to more deeply understand the relationship of licensure to social work education. Future studies to more deeply probe the relationship of pedagogy and curriculum to exam success and failure are necessary, as are studies that look at the relationship between the social work curriculum and licensing exam con-

tent.

#### Discussion

Licensure and its relationship to social work education is a work in progress with areas of consensus and agreement and areas fraught with tension. In terms of areas with wide agreement, the following stand out:

- Social work educators are familiar with license requirements in their state (92% agreement).
- Social work students are highly anxious about the exam (82% agreement).
- Social work education should work closely with ASWB to develop the licensing exam (81% agreement)
- Social work educators should work closely with state licensing boards to regulate social work practice (81% agreement).
- The content of licensing exams should correspond with CSWE accreditation standards (75% agreement).
- Social work students bear the ultimate responsibility for license exam preparation (74% agreement).
- The social work curriculum should prepare students to successfully pass the BSW and MSW exams (69% agreement).

The areas in which there were mixed results suggest that there are still many issues that need discussion and resolution:

- License exam pass rates should be part of program accreditation (41% agree, 33% disagree).
- License exam pass rates are a valid measure of social work program quality (31% agree, 41% disagree).
- License exams help to improve the quality of social work education (30% agree, 38% disagree).
- The content of the license exam is a good reflection of the social work curriculum (22% agree, 51% disagree).
- The license exam is a valid measure of beginning practice competence (36% agree, 32% disagree).
- All social work educators should be required

## Faculty Perceptions of Professional Licensure

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to hold a current social work license (40% agree, 43% disagree).

Mandatory licensure for social work faculty remains a contentious issue. Over two-thirds of respondents in this study are licensed, but of those not licensed, over three-quarters are eligible for licensure but have not pursued a license because it is not needed for teaching (47%) or because they did not think it was important (12%). In light of the preponderance of licensed respondents, it is interesting that more respondents disagreed that licensure should be required for all social work faculty. The results also indicated that licensed social work educators are much more likely to support mandatory licensing requirements for all faculty, for practice faculty, and for field faculty. Despite the lack of broad support for requiring licensure for all social work faculty, there was wide support for requiring practice and practicum faculty to be licensed. This finding suggests that faculty do not see teaching as a form of practice, which is an argument that has been used to propose mandatory licensure for all faculty (Bibus & Boutte-Queen, 2011).

The findings show that social work educators overwhelmingly believe that licensure is an important issue for social work education, yet there is little evidence from the findings that licensure exerts a significant impact on the curriculum and courses. Only 38% of respondents agreed that the licensing exam had an impact on their own teaching. A scant 21% said that the license exam had an impact on elective course content, with a slightly higher percent (29%) agreeing that the exam has an impact on required course content in their program. These findings are not appreciably different from the findings of Cherry et al. (1989) that only 22% of respondents reported that the licensure exam had an impact on curricula.

It is interesting that the respondents tend to believe that students fail the licensing exam for reasons that could be addressed through exam preparation (the student is not a good test-taker or the student does not have enough experience with objective exams), yet only a little over half of respondents agreed that social work programs should provide license exam preparation to students. If exam preparation is not widely available, it is per-

haps alarming to note that only 22% of respondents agreed that the content of the exam is a good reflection of the social work curriculum.

Across the board, respondents considered national pass rates for the Bachelors, Masters, Clinical, and Advanced Generalist exams to be in the range of 10 points (71-80% range) lower than the acceptable pass rates for their own school (81-90% range). At the time the survey was administered, the most recent ASWB pass rates were published in 2009, with a 79.3% pass rate for Bachelors, a 74.5% pass rate for Masters, a 57% pass rate for Advanced Generalist, and a 74.6% pass rate for the Clinical exam. The ASWB pass rates for 2012 (ASWB, 2012) results show marked improvement for the Masters exam (83.6%), so it will be interesting to see whether this improvement persists in the coming years. In this regard, one respondent stated, "Until licensure exam content and CSWE competency and practice skills content become more fully integrated with one another there will not be an acceptable pass rate." It should be noted that both licensed (39%, n = 85) and nonlicensed (40%, n = 38) respondents agreed that the contents of the licensing exam should correspond with CSWE accreditation standards. In light of this study's findings, we find it interesting that respondents expect their own graduates to pass the exam at a higher rate than the national numbers. Perhaps we all think that our own program and students are "above average," but this begs the question about acceptable pass rates nationally. One might ask why we accept a pass rate lower than 80%. Why do we not set a goal of increasing the national pass rates to 90% or above? It is not unusual for schools of nursing to proclaim passing rates of 95 – 99% on the NCLEX exam. Perhaps it is time to set those high rates as the goal for social work practice.

The extent to which licensing exams are related to program quality remains a contentious issue, which is confirmed by the findings of this study. Less than one-third of respondents agreed that licensure exams exert that kind of influence on programs. Perhaps this result only reflects the reality that the licensing exam still has very little impact on curriculum. There was broad agree-

ment, however, that accreditation standards and exam content should be in alignment. As accreditation is the avenue toward quality improvement, this study suggests that the time has come for in-depth exploration of ways to accomplish this alignment. As CSWE moves toward revision of accreditation standards, it would be advisable to include discussions of exam content in the process.

In conclusion, this study found overwhelming support for greater involvement of social work education with the work of ASWB and the license exam. As one respondent stated “There is a disconnect between social work educators, textbook authors, ASWB, and the social work practice community. Each seems to think they know what is best, and no one is talking or listening to each other.” The findings of this study suggest that social work educators and organizations need to work more closely with ASWB and state licensing boards to foster a sense of cooperation and a shared vision of practice preparation and competence. As one respondent said, “I believe we should coordinate the BSW/MSW curriculum CLOSELY with/licensure and have high expectations in internship and practice after graduation. Be as tough as health and teaching fields! If we don't take this seriously, we'll be facing a tough climb for the full recognition of our skills and knowledge.”

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