Building an assessment framework:

Processes, measures, training, and challenges

The USC Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work currently has 3266 students in its MSW program, 1230 of whom are in campus-based academic centers and 2036 in the virtual academic center. In fall 2015, the school launched the first year courses of a new curriculum (in development over the previous two years) in our campus-based academic centers. The existing curriculum continues to be offered for second year students on the ground, and for all students in the virtual program, as the year-long process of conversion to the virtual format enables a launch in fall 2016.

Development of the 2015 EPAS assessment framework began in the field department, and was then adapted for curriculum assessment. Our presentation will describe processes and instruments designed for both assessments, and important features of the processes of developing them.

Field assessment. Development of the School’s assessment process and measures to reflect the 2015 EPAS began in 2014 with field practicum. The School hired a consulting firm, Clarus Research, to work closely with field faculty on developing indicators specifically for field and on developing a rating scale that could measure a full range of skills from beginning to end of the program. Initially based on 2015 EPAS behaviors for generalist practice, we then developed behaviors for specialized practice in our departments of children, youth and families; adults and healthy aging; and communities, organizations and business innovations. The field assessment instrument was converted into an online data collection system developed by the School to collect assessment data from field faculty, field instructors, and students.

As part of our presentation, we will describe how we developed our 2015 EPAS-based field assessment instrument to measure student competencies in the field; how the online system supported greater ease of data collection as well as better utilization of ratings; how we developed and tested our rating scale to generate empirically-based competency standards; how we trained field faculty and instructors on the new instrument; and how we used early assessment data to make improvements to our process and measures. We will describe our plan for data analysis using the rating scale to measure progression of competencies around practice-related knowledge and behaviors over time in the program.

Curriculum assessment. Using the field assessment framework as a model, a work group (comprised of members of the student learning outcomes committee of curriculum council, Clarus research, other faculty) focused on: 1). meaningful assessment of student learning outcomes that would enable continuous improvement of our curriculum; 2). holistic assessment de-coupled from reliance on grades alone; and 3). multidimensional assessment of competencies across levels of mastery.

All required courses in generalist and specialized practice were included in the assessment. Faculty used an iterative process to map competencies across the curriculum, and identified competencies and behaviors to be measured in specific courses, ultimately arriving at two incidences for each competency across required generalist courses, and up to two across required courses in each area of specialized practice.

Instructors received (electronically) a rating sheet for each student, listing competency behaviors measured in the course. The 10-point rating scale used in field assessment was further refined using six anchors across ten levels of acquisition or mastery of competency, with instructors basing ratings on overall performance in the course, to include performance on assignments, quality of questions asked and answered and other contributions in class and participation in role plays and exercises. A benchmarking instrument indicating average expected ranges of competence from generalist to specialized practice was developed and tied to specific courses. Webinars and in-person assessment training sessions were offered to course lead instructors to provide assistance to all faculty. Faculty engagement in developing the assessment instrument and subsequent preparation of faculty to complete the assessment proved to be essential components of the assessment process.

Lessons learned, including factors that facilitated our efforts, as well as challenges encountered, will be highlighted and discussed, along with innovations spurred by the need to rapidly develop effective and efficient assessment processes based on the 2015 EPAS for a large and complex MSW program. Samples of materials used for training and assessment will be available for participants at the workshop.