



## **Ensuring Quality and Accessibility: CSWE Principles for a Higher Education Act Reauthorization**

Social work education, and higher education in general, must be accessible and affordable to students if we are to prepare a workforce ready to meet the challenges facing the United States. Furthermore, we must ensure quality in education. For social work that means preparing a professional workforce that promotes individual, family, and community well-being, and social and economic justice. Schools and programs of social work are preparing a pipeline of professionals to serve in a number of capacities that ensure the social safety-net in the U.S. These professionals are working in behavioral health care, child welfare, schools, hospitals, local social services agencies, and with veterans across the U.S., just to name a few. As the 116th Congress considers changes to the *Higher Education Act* (HEA), CSWE supports the following principles to ensure accessibility, affordability, and quality.

### **Principles for Ensuring Accessible and Affordable Higher Education**

As policymakers consider making reforms to the HEA, CSWE supports the following principles that support its mission:

- ***Allow Accreditors to Focus on Educational Quality and Removing Barriers that Inhibit Quality:*** The federal government has long relied on accreditors to assure the quality of higher education. The role of the federal government has been to enforce the rules and regulations related to student aid. CSWE strongly supports this division and encourages higher education legislation to continue this practice. Because institutional accreditors are responsible for ensuring federal funds are going to quality institutions, it is reasonable to have federal oversight of this process. Most programmatic accreditors, however, do not have a role in determining if an institution is eligible to participate in the federal student aid programs under the HEA. CSWE supports legislative language within HEA that would assure that programmatic accreditors are exempt from federal regulations as they relate to accreditation. This will allow CSWE to focus on ensuring the highest professional standards, leaves control to the academic accrediting community, and accounts for institutional diversity.
- ***Protect the Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) Program:*** The PSLF program was created in 2007 to encourage students to pursue public service careers. Eligible public service employees include teachers, police officers, firefighters, social workers and nurses, among a variety of other professions. To qualify for forgiveness under PSLF, borrowers who enter full-time employment at qualifying public service organizations must make 120 on-time monthly payments—which total 10 years of payments—while enrolled in a qualified repayment plan.

Additionally, for professions like social work, where wages are often lower when compared to other professions, PSLF encourages professionals to pursue opportunities in critical high-needs areas. Social workers provide invaluable service, very often public service, to society. Recognizing this service through programs like PSLF, will allow more students to pursue the profession, and allow them to achieve important financial milestones in their own lives.

*CSWE is a national association of social work education programs and individuals that ensures and enhances the quality of social work education for a professional practice that promotes individual, family, and community well-being, and social and economic justice.*

- **Recognize the Important Role of Graduate Education:** Graduate education is vital to professions that serve communities throughout the U.S. including social work. A master's degree in social work (MSW) is required for areas of specialized practice (such as behavioral health and substance abuse). Efforts to make graduate education more expensive, such as eliminating graduate student eligibility for Federal Work Study funds, and the elimination Grad PLUS loans, will force students to take out private loans or make it so only wealthy students can pursue graduate education. Additionally, in light of the continuing demand for social workers to assist with mental health, substance-use disorders, and aging populations, social work programs should be designated for inclusion in the Graduate Assistance in Areas of National Need (GAANN) program.
- **Higher Education Must be Accessible and Affordable:** The need for postsecondary education in today's economy is undeniable. Increasing costs, however, make that a difficult reality for many students. Policies like loan forgiveness as part of income-based repayment plans, programs like Federal Supplemental Educational Opportunity Grants, and other student aid programs help increase access for low-income students. CSWE supports indexing the maximum Pell Grant to inflation.
- **Ensure Efforts to Address Campus Sexual Assault are Effective:** The continued attention to sexual harassment in the workplace parallels the issues campuses have long had with campus sexual assault. CSWE firmly believes students and vulnerable populations should be protected, and believes that social workers as professionals are often equipped to provide support in this area. Higher education legislation should ensure that students have access to trained professionals like social workers and psychologists when addressing the issue of sexual assault on campus.
- **Acknowledge the Intersection of Professional Competencies and Institutional Mission:** A strength of the higher education system in the U.S. is the diversity of its institutions. Social work requires the ability to engage diversity and difference. This can lead to instances where institutional mission can conflict with professional competencies. CSWE supports higher education policies that recognize that institutional mission should not trump professional competencies, especially as it relates to programmatic accreditation.

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