Guest Editorial—Advancing 21st-Century University–Child Welfare Agency Partnerships

University-agency partnerships have been key to workforce development for public child welfare, private child welfare agencies, and tribal programs. With local, state, federal, and tribal funds, such partnerships have created more alignment between what child welfare systems need and social work education and training. Fostering public agency, private agency, and tribal child welfare workforce development and systems change, these partnerships have been evolving for decades. They have been accelerated with traineeships from the Children’s Bureau beginning in the 1970s and later, in the 1980s, with Title IV-E funds for child welfare training and education. This acceleration has increased in the past decade with the addition of special federal initiatives such as the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute.

Such partnerships cannot be taken for granted. They require intentional designs, complete with shared purposes and strategies for attaining them. This involves ongoing reciprocity and continuous evaluation-driven improvements. This also involves skillful and visionary leadership in social work education and in child welfare agency administration. Well-prepared graduates may become the backbone of the agency with leadership and change proficiencies along with effective family and child engagement and capacity-building skills. A poor fit with a graduate from a social work program may lead to retention issues, eroding one of the very goals of the partnership such as the reprofessionalization of the child welfare workforce.

This special issue of the Journal of Social Work Education adds to the literature on these partnerships in several ways. First, the evolution is captured in the discussion of tribal and public agency developments. Second, the evaluation collaboration that has emerged from training and educational partnerships offers some diverse perspectives on the kinds of partnership models that might further enhance positive outcomes for children and families. Finally, the data-driven nature of workforce development is depicted as a cornerstone of continuous quality improvement. These partnership descriptions feature social work education’s innovations and outreach and agency commitment and imagination to craft these productive professional relationships.

Leaders of child welfare systems work toward improvements in outcomes for children with the triple aims of child safety, permanency and well-being. To achieve these aims, some child welfare leaders have adopted practice models to guide change in the way in which families and children are served. Others have focused on more culturally competent practice, given the rising racial disparities of those in care. The partnerships that are featured in this special issue reflect some of the innovations in service priorities and systems changes along with workforce development. In addition to the partnerships described in these articles, we want to acknowledge the multiple long-standing and new emerging partnerships across the United States and Canada. They are the outgrowth of years of development in initiatives funded by Title IV-E and traineeships funded by the Children’s Bureau, most recently through the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute.
In the first section we introduce three articles that depict some of the ways social work education can be aligned with needs of the state child welfare system or local agency. Such an alignment may be related to the adoption of a systemwide change model. In the article by Deglau and colleagues, “Practice Change in Child Welfare: The Interface of Training and Social Work Education,” child welfare workers’ reflections are presented. They assess how critical their professional education was to their skill and knowledge in implementing a new practice model, namely family team meetings. Falk offers another perspective from BSW graduates as they reflect on their experiences and practices implementing a strengths-based, solution-focused change model. In “Alumni of a BSW-Level Specialized Title IV-E Program Voice Their Experiences in the Workplace,” the level of alignment between the agency and the school curriculum is depicted along with field placements and coworker and consequent retention issues. The article by Strand, Dettlaff, and Counts-Spriggs, “Promising Innovations in Child Welfare Education: Findings From a National Initiative,” offers exemplars of partnerships funded by the Children’s Bureau through the National Child Welfare Workforce Institute. Their two examples address specific competency-based needs of agencies. For example, in one school the child welfare curricula mirrored the competencies sought by the agency. In another, field placement rotations are tested that advance more child welfare–specific practice- and policy-relevant competencies across the continuum of services in federal, state, and nonprofit settings.

Context and populations served matter greatly in child welfare practice. In fact, special populations to be served require unique workforce preparation in educational programs. Riebschleger and colleagues offer a competency framework for child welfare practice in rural areas. Their article “Preparing Social Work Students for Rural Child Welfare Practice: Emerging Curriculum Competencies” makes the case for a unique constellation of competency domains for rural child welfare work. Cross and colleagues present tribal partnerships and discuss “NCWWI Tribal Traineeship Programs: Promoting Diversity in the Child Welfare Workforce.” They offer an analysis of key program elements involving five different educational initiatives among American Indian students and allies as they prepared for Indian child welfare practice. Given the requirements of the Indian Child Welfare Act and the legal mandate for culturally competent and distinctively unique practices with tribal communities, effective preparatory programs become exemplars as the Indian Child Welfare Act remains a paramount practice concern.

Statewide partnerships may vary in scope and impact. Two articles provide historical perspectives, bibliographic detail, and analyses of innovations addressing statewide improvements in child welfare partnerships, workforce development, and impacts. Many partnerships go through changes and face multiple challenges. Some end and some restart. In “Ready, Set, Go … Again: Renewing an Academy–Agency Child Welfare Partnership,” Pierce, McGuire, and Howes describe the need for relational capital, trust, and embeddedness as they analyze the reemergence of a partnership. In “California’s Title IV-E Partnership: A Statewide University–Agency Collaboration—Characteristics and Implications for Replication,” Mathias and her colleagues describe a complex partnership involving 22 social work education programs. This iterative, county-driven partnership journey is analyzed as evaluative elements guide improvements. These examples are testaments to the important role of leadership and building resilient partnerships that are sustained over time and illustrate the dynamic nature of these partnerships.
As partnerships have evolved they have become more systematically reliant on research evidence about best practices and population needs and dynamics. Such attention to effectiveness as well as to continuous quality improvement increasingly becomes a cornerstone of systems and workforce enhancements. The article by Fallon and coauthors, “Increasing Research Capacity in Ontario Child Welfare Organizations: A Unique University–Child Welfare Agency Partnership,” depicts a knowledge mobilization effort involving public and nonprofit child welfare partners. Challenges as well as successes are described along with the utility of practical tools such as fact sheets to inform practice. In “Building an Evidence-Driven Child Welfare Workforce: A University–Agency Partnership,” authors Lery, Weigmann, and Duerr Berrick describe one model for generating continuous quality improvements. They address the need for methods to foster evidence-based decision making in child welfare in the Bay Area in California. Such continuous quality improvement partnerships invite new models for preparing social work graduates along with capacity building in local agencies to use the data for practice and systems change. One aspect of partnerships involves the generation of a more culturally and ethnically diverse workforce to be more responsive to racial disparities in children and families served. Leake and her colleagues present data and offer lessons learned in their article “NCWWI Traineeships: A National Cross-Site Evaluation of Child Welfare Stipend Programs for Ethnically Diverse Students.” They underscore the capacity of schools to build a more diverse child welfare workforce through partnerships while suggesting areas for improvement. For example, field placements need to be better addressed because they play a pivotal role in recruitment, retention, and student satisfaction, particularly at the master’s level.

Taken together, these articles capture the ongoing challenges of connecting schools and departments of social work to child welfare agency needs. They address workforce development along with competency-based supports for new practice models and more evidence-informed decision making. Silences in research on partnerships also invite new developments for future research and may help guide the field. One key gap involves the effectiveness of these partnerships because they have an impact on the lives of children and families in the system.

Too little is known still about the differential effectiveness of a trained social worker who is savvy in child welfare over a caseworker without such credentials. Another involves retention solutions, given the fact that despite these partnerships, workers’ satisfactory fit for child welfare eludes some of these initiatives. Not enough is known about the workplace conditions that optimize and facilitate effective social work practice and the steps that social work programs can take to effectively prepare graduates for the transition to the child welfare workplace. Workforce churn also affects outcomes for children and families, and thus such partnerships are critical to stabilizing systems and caseworker continuity. Just as the triple goals of safety, permanency, and well-being drive the system in relation to its obligations to abused and neglected children so too do they implicate the workforce. Secondary trauma threatens many a worker, and thus worker safety and protection from trauma effects, permanence in job tenure, and well-being become parallel processes for partnership attention. In fact, more attention to these parallel processes may help build the 21st-century partnerships more systematically as social worker retention and workforce well-being become paramount preconditions for child and family well-being.

Finally, we must ask the question regarding the extent to which our partnerships need more tweaking and more orientation toward poverty and families struggling with issues of neglect. We are reminded that the Institute of Medicine report on child maltreatment found that more than
75% of the child welfare cases involve child neglect rather than physical or sexual abuse (IOM and NRC, 2014). As partnerships evolve, these national data need to become centerpieces of university-agency dialogue and lessons learned across domains such as tribal communities. These deliberations are essential as schools and agencies examine and inventively test new ways to address poverty and chronically vulnerable and often fragile families.

This special issue celebrates social work education’s and the profession’s ongoing commitment to the field of child welfare. It acknowledges the challenges and importance of partnerships between our social work programs and those agencies that provide the professional workplace for many of our graduates. The central role of academic and agency leadership, student preparation and training, and supporting a diverse and well-prepared workforce are highlighted. Continual commitment, innovation, and advanced practice knowledge are required for a stronger social work partnership and presence in the field to secure positive outcomes for children and families.

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