

Strategic Plan 2021-2026



School of Social Work

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN



Introduction

As we celebrated our 75th anniversary, the School of Social Work at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign engaged in strategic planning to articulate and focus our efforts over the next five years. We were guided by existing strengths in our School, as well as the expressed aspirations of School members and other stakeholders. We also sought to build on the ambitious “Next 150” strategic plan developed by the University for our campus.

Our resulting strategic plan is organized into four sections. Three of these focus upon the critical missions that encompass most of our work: research, teaching and learning, and community and public engagement. The fourth area, our School environment and culture, considers the atmosphere we believe is crucial to stimulate progress in each of the other three areas.

We hope that this plan provides our many stakeholders with a sense of important objectives on which we collectively seek to excel. We understand that strategic plans are aspirational, and that we have much room for growth. However, we have selected areas in which we have many strengths, and in which we are well-positioned to make major contributions. We hope that our many colleagues and stakeholders will join us on this journey!

Mission and Values

The School of Social Work enhances people's health and wellbeing, and empowers individuals, communities, and organizations to dismantle inequitable systems and promote social justice. We conduct cutting-edge interdisciplinary research with real world impact, educate students to be effective and innovative practitioners, and collaborate with community partners to reimagine and design solutions to social challenges.

Innovative Research for Social Justice and Community Impact

Conducting innovative, high quality research is critical to our goal of contributing to thought leadership and related policy and practice solutions to daunting societal problems. We celebrate that our research focuses on diverse social problems and examines issues using many perspectives and methods.

Yet we share common aspirations to enhance research having measurable community and social justice impacts, and that meaningfully engages communities and vulnerable populations. As part of one of the greatest information and technology research universities in the world, we value our opportunity to be national leaders in bringing new technologies to social work research and interventions.

The School of Social Work will have recognized strengths in:



1

Conducting innovative research that results in real-world impacts on practices, policies, and programs

- Engage in interdisciplinary research that brings diverse perspectives and skill sets to complex social programs
- Produce research that contributes to public dialogues and improves the lives of families and communities
- Develop innovative methods that deepen our understanding of social issues, provide exemplars for researchers, and allow us to respond to social problems in new ways

2

Emphasizing social justice perspectives as an overarching theme of our research

- Focus on research that responds to systemic social problems including poverty, health disparities, and racism
- Bring equity and disparity focus to research projects
- Build on the strengths of marginalized groups
- Emphasize social justice/equality impacts in disseminating research findings



3

Creating deep partnerships with stakeholders to assure relevance and sensitivity of research

- Develop strong linkages with community members, government officials, and social service agency leaders
- Be recognized leaders in listening and responding to the needs and ideas of community members
- Involve community stakeholders in key aspects of project development
- Provide useful feedback to community members on research results
- Enhance training on how to initiate collaborations that will assist human service agencies



4

Utilizing emerging technologies to create new service interventions and research methodologies

- Extend networks with technology experts to enhance interdisciplinary partnerships
- Promote the innovative use of technology in social work research and service provision
Educate faculty members and students on new technologies and develop strategies to assure access to technology resources and expertise
- Contribute to societal dialogues on digital inequalities and technology related ethical issues that affect disadvantaged populations

Real World, Student-Centered, Accessible Social Work Education

As universities increasingly promote real-world learning experiences, social work stands as a long-established leader. Our intensive field placements in hundreds of service agencies exemplify immersive learning, and our classes feature close interactions with community practitioners.

We will provide cutting edge instruction for our students on evidence-based interventions, service innovations, culturally sensitive practices, and systemic racial and social inequities. We will extend access to our educational programs geographically and to coincide with the work and family balance needs of our students. We recognize that the post-pandemic world requires adaptability to rapidly changing circumstances, and we are poised to apply lessons learned during this period to strengthen our teaching and program delivery.

The School of Social Work will have recognized strengths in providing:

1

Transformational and continually evolving learning across degree programs

- Obtain continuous feedback from community partners on educational needs to prepare for practice
- Infuse knowledge on evidence-based services, and educate students on how to apply research in their practice
- Provide diverse cross-cultural perspectives, an emphasis on social justice, anti-racism, and systemic disparity issues
- Enhance curriculum and teaching delivery by providing robust training and professional development
- Promote and support faculty research on teaching methods and innovations

2

Student immersed and community engaged learning experiences

- Provide field placements that immerse students in challenging mentored practice settings
- Collaborate with community partners through our Community Learning Lab to create engaged learning opportunities within our classes
- Create simulated learning experiences to prepare students for real world practice experiences
- Utilize the rich practice experience of our alums and community partners to bring fresh practice experiences to our courses
- Engage students in faculty research, and provide mentored research training opportunities for Ph.D. students



3

Student centered instruction and opportunities responsive to diverse educational needs

- Develop short courses, certificates, and optional learning opportunities to enhance specific skill sets
- Provide professional education and socialization activities to prepare students for employment and professional practice
- Expand interactions with faculty members beyond courses to allow enriched mentoring
- Create enhanced linkages to employment opportunities for graduates
- Expand non-degree certificate programs and continuing education experiences for alums and community members

4

Innovative technology development and applications to improve instructional quality, access to education, and awareness of technology applications in social work

- Create technological and pedagogical innovations to enhance teaching and learning
- Support instructor use of new teaching technologies by providing ongoing technology education training
- Assure that students have access to needed technology, technology support, and training on online technology used in classes
- Promote statewide access to our degree programs through online and hybrid program delivery options, with particular attention to underrepresented students and those in areas with high need for social workers
- Educate our students about technology use in social work practice, and related ethical issues affecting diverse populations



Engage with Communities for Improved Practice, Workforce Development, and Solutions to Pressing Social Problems

Effective social work research, education, and practice depend on close partnerships with communities and social services agencies. Listening closely to the diverse perspectives of these community partners is critical to assure the relevance and impact of our work, and we strive to share our expertise in ways that build community capacity. Our field likewise faces ongoing workforce development challenges that extend beyond our degree programs.

We therefore are committed to the effective training of social service agency workers, and to the lifelong learning and skill refreshing of both our alumni and other social workers. Our commitment to engagement extends across the substantive areas in which we have strengths, but we especially value partnering with communities to improve our collective responses to social and racial justice issues.

The School of Social Work will have recognized strengths in:

1

Partnering with community service agencies and community groups to respond to critical community needs

- Develop stronger networks, such as through community advisory boards, to encourage ongoing input on needed educational, research, and service needs
- Share our research and teaching expertise in responding to community-identified needs
Utilize the School's Community Learning Lab to build deep connections with local agencies and to connect community needs to student learning experiences
- Support and participate in community forums on critical social issues

2

Providing continuing education and training for social workers and other human services professionals

- Increase range of continuing education opportunities, and nimbly respond to emerging practice needs
- Emphasize innovative technology use to extend access to continuing education
- Offer non-degree certificate programs and micro-credentials that allow alumni and other community members to gain recognizable specialized expertise

3

Leading state and local human service workforce development

- Partner with state agencies to provide training needed to improve social service delivery
- Develop programming leading to social service employment in high needs areas such as rural health, child welfare, and school social work
- Foster ongoing dialogues with human service agency leaders regarding evolving workforce development needs

4

Contributing to thought leadership and solutions to pressing social problems by engaging with social service partners

- Establish strong presence in state, national, and international social service organizations
- Build more robust government networks to facilitate our responses to emerging issues and to encourage the use of our research findings in decision-making
- Increase the engagement of government and organizational leaders in our programs, through participation in classes, forums, and conferences



School Culture and Environment: Valuing Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Transparency

The culture we aspire to create is fundamental to everything we do. It includes striving for diversity in our employees, students, and community partnerships.

This aspiration is consistent with our social justice mission, but it is more than that. We firmly believe that we collectively learn and develop better solutions when diverse perspectives are at the center of our daily lives and our decision-making.

Developing a workplace environment in which all people are treated with equal respect regardless of their positions likewise is critical, as is transparency in our interactions and decision-making. We only will maximize our impact in an atmosphere in which we draw upon and recognize the contributions of all of our members. Finally, given our commitment to social and racial justice, we must serve as an exemplar in equitable recruiting, mentoring, and retention, and also stand with our communities in fostering broader anti-racist and culturally sensitive environments.

The School of Social Work culture and environment will:

1

Value the contributions of all School of Social Work members, and promote a culture of positive interactions between members

- Recognize and celebrate the contributions of School members across our many different functions
- Encourage inclusiveness, open discussion, and innovative ideas when examining problems and issues
- Foster diverse decision-making perspectives that cross positions and operational lines
- Promote and practice a culture of transparency and integrity in decision-making
- Emphasize ongoing professional and career track development for employees and students

2

Make diversity, equity, and inclusion central in all of our efforts and activities

- Assure that recruitment efforts promote diversity and access by underrepresented groups
- Develop programming that stimulates discussion on racial justice and diversity issues
- Assure that all students and employees receive training related to diversity, equity, and cultural sensitivity
- Encourage our members to engage in broader activities that promote racial and social justice
- Showcase diversity in our physical space and our communications on accomplishments

3

Create a sense of shared community with School of Social Work stakeholders

- Strengthen information and idea exchange with our community partners through cultivation of strong networks including advisory boards and working groups
- Feature our collective work with community partners in communications and marketing efforts
- Recognize alumni achievements and build alumni support for the work of the School
- Provide robust extended education and professional development opportunities for alumni and community partners



School of Social Work

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS URBANA-CHAMPAIGN