



Memo to the Social Work Profession Regarding Practice Doctorate Program Accreditation

March 31, 2025

Dear social work colleagues, clients, constituents, and public interests,

In social work education, the Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) Board of Accreditation (BOA) is [recognized](#) by the Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) to accredit baccalaureate and master's social work degree programs in the United States and its territories. Since its inception in July 1952 (and its predecessor since 1919), CSWE has accredited master's programs. In 1974, CSWE began accrediting baccalaureate programs.

In recent years, the number of practice doctorate programs has grown from 5 in [2014](#) to 38 in 2024, and continues to grow according to a recent audit of social work programs conducted by CSWE. In response to questions regarding how practice doctorate degrees align within the [social work education continuum](#), CSWE partnered with social work programs, social work educators and leaders, doctoral students, health accreditors, and other constituents to conduct an environmental scan, gather data and feedback, and create [pilot accreditation standards](#) prior to launching the accreditation pilot.

Pilot & Expansion of Scope Request

Beginning in fall 2021, the CSWE BOA piloted accreditation processes for practice doctorate programs [i.e., Doctor of Social Work (DSW)]. CSWE BOA seeks to accredit professional practice degrees to ensure quality learning environments; adequate student preparation and health and safety; training of ethical and competent practitioners, scholars, and leaders; and public accountability and transparency.

A pilot review is required by [CHEA](#) for the CSWE BOA to request a change of scope to include practice doctorate program accreditation in its CHEA recognition. A change in the recognized scope of accreditation requires that the accrediting organization submit "evidence that the new proposed scope has been effectively implemented at a minimum of two institutions or programs," and "evidence that the accrediting organization's capacity is adequate to accommodate the proposed change in scope." A pilot is also best practice among accreditors as it allows CSWE BOA and CSWE staff to review standards and evaluate each stage in the accreditation process to make adjustments, as needed. Three pilot programs were granted initial accreditation in February 2025 and are listed in the [Directory of Accredited programs](#).

Social Work Education Continuum

CSWE recognizes professional social work education exists on a continuum. Baccalaureate and master's social work programs maintain their significant and vital role in the [social work education continuum](#) preparing students for competent social work practice across all system levels (i.e., micro, mezzo, and macro) and with diverse clients and constituencies. Baccalaureate programs prepare students for generalist practice while master's programs prepare students for generalist and specialized practice. Practice doctorate programs prepare practitioner-scholars to advance social work practice and innovate at the micro, mezzo, and/or macro practice levels as well as in higher education and/or professional leadership. The CSWE-BOA and [2015 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards \(EPAS\)](#) and [2022 EPAS](#) continue to emphasize the value of baccalaureate and master's level social work preparation for

faculty, administrators, and field instructors in accredited social work programs as well as for post-degree social work practice.

Retroactive Accreditation Status & Career Implications for Graduates

Piloting is an intentionally incremental process. Until accreditation is readily available and all existing and developing practice doctorate programs have an opportunity to seek accreditation, the CSWE-accreditation status of practice doctorate programs should not be considered when evaluating qualifications of graduates for licensure, employment, and other professional pursuits.

Once practice doctorate programs receive initial accreditation, a program's accreditation status cannot retroactively apply to previous students or curricula. The accreditation status obtained at initial accreditation applies to the components that were peer-reviewed during the multi-modality accreditation review process. Review policies *1.6 Accreditation Status Statements for Websites & Materials* and *5.2 Retroactive Accredited Status* in the [Accreditation Policy Handbook](#) for more details.

Call to Action

During this historical time in social work education and practice, we implore social work licensing boards, employers, and professional decision-makers to recognize that practice doctorate programs did not have access to CSWE-accreditation until the pilot review concluded in 2025, with the earliest retroactive accreditation date available in 2025. **Therefore, former graduates' careers should not be negatively impacted nor penalized, and their qualifications considered equivalent to those that graduate from future CSWE-accredited practice doctorate programs.**

For more information, review the Practice Doctorate Program Accreditation Toolkit on the CSWE website for [implementation information](#).

Please direct questions about practice doctorate program accreditation to accreditation@cswe.org.



Halaevalu F. Ofahengaue Vakalahi, MSW, PhD
President and CEO



Shanéa Thomas, EdD, LICSW, CSE
Executive Director of Accreditation



Tom Gregoire, PhD
Chair, Board of Accreditation