



## Respecting diversity

*Respecting humanity of all cultures and supporting lasting positive change in our society are the ongoing activities of cultural competency*  
—Janice Sandefur, executive director, NASW-Mississippi chapter, from “Social Work Voices: What Cultural Competency Means to Me”

The personification of Justice as a blindfolded figure has long stood as a symbol of the objectivity of the law and the impartiality of those who administer it. In dispensing discipline, regulatory boards are to apply the law without regard or providing accommodations for cultural differences. Yet respecting diversity and being sensitive to these differences form the heart of social work ideology. “Cultural Competence in Regulation” was the topic of a panel discussion about this issue at ASWB’s 2014 Spring Education Meeting.

Included in the conversation were the voices of social work educators, represented by Darla Spence Coffey, president and CEO of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE); U.S. practitioners, represented by Angelo McClain, CEO of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW); and Canadian practitioners, represented by Alison MacDonald, executive director and registrar of the Saskatchewan Association of Social Workers. Mary Jo Monahan, ASWB CEO, represented the voices of social work regulators and also served as moderator. During the second half of the two-hour session, attendees added their voices, asking questions and offering comments.

Of particular interest during the discussion was Coffey’s introduction of the phrase “cultural humility,” which in the educational environment is becoming the terminology of choice. The term, Coffey explained, “drives home the point that cultural competency is not an event or a task but a lifelong process. It speaks to the standard where one is an engaged learner of the other.”

Coffey gave an overview of the draft 2015 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS), which include nine competencies and 24 practice behaviors. The two



*Alison MacDonald, registrar, Saskatchewan Association of Social Workers, presented the Canadian perspective about the role of cultural competency in regulation. Other panelists, from left: Mary Jo Monahan, ASWB CEO; Darla Spence Coffey, president and CEO, Council on Social Work Education, and Angelo McClain, CEO, National Association of Social Workers.*

*Research conducted by ASWB of the 62 jurisdictions in North America revealed the following:*

*27 jurisdictions include some type of cultural competency requirement in their laws*

*3 jurisdictions include cultural competency as part of education*

*13 include cultural competency as part of their professional conduct standards*

*9 have cultural competency included in practice standards*

*10 require cultural competency as part of continuing education*

*1 jurisdiction (Nevada) includes cultural competency in its service definition*

standards that relate to continuing competency are “engage diversity and differences in practice” and “advance human rights and social and economic justice.” Added to the list of diversity factors in the new EPAS for the first time, Coffey noted, is “tribal sovereign status.” While managing the list of diversity factors defined in the EPAS continues to be a challenge, there is “power and meaning in having it articulated, in having it named,” Coffey said. What is key for students to understand, she continued, is not being expert in any one of the differences but being able to put themselves in a position of learning from others at all times.

Respect for diversity is also expected at the program level, she said, and schools use faculty and student surveys to assess climate issues of inclusiveness, openness, and fair and equitable treatment. Programs develop their own curricula and demonstrate to CSWE how their students achieve the competencies. Coffey concluded by saying that CSWE-accredited programs take very seriously their role as gatekeepers to the profession.

In the practice field, McClain stated, the NASW Code of Ethics and Cultural Competency Standards are broadly embraced, grounded in the values of service, social justice, dignity and worth of the person, the importance of human relationships, integrity, and competence. Additionally, practitioners are enjoined to recognize incompetence of colleagues or practice, be supportive, and take action as needed.

McClain spoke about the need of practitioners to be able to adopt

a world view that is accepting of different perspectives. He cited working with African American clients as an example, noting that behaviors described as adaptive when viewed through the Afrocentric perspective could be misunderstood as dysfunctional if interpreted through a Eurocentric lens. Some of the differences include the Afrocentric values of the extended family and flexible family roles, creative problem-solving, exercising economic independence in the face of having nothing, cultural continuity as expressed in storytelling and oral histories, and the importance of spirituality as a source of support, hope, and strength. In concluding his remarks, McClain said: “NASW wants to be a part of the leadership that helps the country achieve racial equity. We know to do that we have to be authentic in our discussion and persistent.”

As the Canadian voice, MacDonald discussed how multiculturalism gained stature in the 1970s, becoming a specific requirement in the standards of practice. She noted that accreditation standards issued by the Canadian Association of Social Work Education include Francophone history and indigenous peoples history. Also unique to Canada are Québec nationalism and the recognition of its “country within country” status. Canadians, she said, celebrate their multiculturalism during heritage days festivities every year.

She shared the regulatory challenges of serving the indigenous peoples in the province of Alberta, where she was associate registrar for 15 years, and the steps taken to address the problem. “Indigenous rights are not as well recognized in Canada,” she

noted in comparison to the U.S., where reservations are sovereign territory, exempt from regulation. In Canada, reservations are under federal jurisdiction but governed by provincial law. In Alberta, indigenous peoples represented five percent of the population but 50% of the children in the child welfare system were from this population. There were not enough social workers with the skills and knowledge to work in the indigenous communities, and social work programs contributed to the problem by passing students who were indigenous but who were not competent to practice.

In 1999, the Social Work Aboriginal Committee was formed to advise the Alberta college on these issues. Working their way across the province, the members sought to understand what was required for providing services to indigenous communities. It took 14 years, MacDonald said, but the committee developed indigenous social work practice standards that included requirements such as being able

to work in the language and being educated at the feet of elders.

Complaints regarding the lack of cultural competency still surface, MacDonald said, and regulators must consider culture in the disciplinary process. In Alberta, for example, a complaint against an indigenous social worker was assigned an indigenous investigator. “It is not about having different laws based on culture,” she said, “but on allowing for things like sentencing circles.”

Providing a North American perspective, Monahan discussed the role of cultural competency in the ASWB social work licensing exams. “For the ASWB exam program, cultural competency means more than including questions about diversity on the exam,” she said. “We believe the association itself must demonstrate cultural competency. Cultural competency is not restricted to one section or a few questions on the exam.”

In exam administration, ASWB has taken steps “to ensure that

everyone who is taking our exams has the same opportunities to demonstrate their competence and has an equal chance,” said Monahan. Accommodations for disabilities and arrangements for candidates whose first language is not English are available if approved by the jurisdiction where the candidate is applying for licensure and if other qualifications are met. “Our pledge,” said Monahan, “is that exam candidates will have access to a respectful and equitable exam experience.”

The takeaway: Cultural competency has a place in the education and practice of social work. Its position in the world of regulation is gaining ground. And while Justice must be allowed to maintain her objective neutrality, cultural competency can be embraced, Monahan summarized, “by taking into account our own contextual factors” so that as regulators “we acknowledge and monitor our own personal biases, especially in discipline.”