

Creating a New Profession

**The Beginnings of Social Work Education in
the United States**

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**Council on Social Work Education
Alexandria, VA**

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Preface

In 1910, a new field called “social work” boasted five professional training schools in the United States. Now, 90 years later, that number has increased more than a hundredfold, to 126 accredited graduate schools of social work and 410 accredited undergraduate programs. All but three states have graduate social work education; every state offers social work education at the baccalaureate level (Lennon, 1999). In 1998, these programs granted over 13,500 MSW degrees and about 11,400 BSW degrees.

The pioneers in professional social work education—people like Mary Richmond, Jeffrey Brackett, Edward Devine, George Haynes, and Edith Abbott—would be astounded at the number, quality, and broad geographical distribution of social work schools and programs. Yet if the pioneers could visit this “new world,” they would also note much that is familiar, including the continued emphasis on “scientific knowledge” and research, the stress placed on field work, the attempt to keep up with new techniques and technology, the significance of race and gender, the search for balance between client-centered and societal perspectives, and the constant pull in classroom teaching between the “theoretical” and the “practical.” Then and now, social work schools and programs have constituted a central arena for making sense of what Linda Shoemaker (1998) calls the “multiple roots and competing visions of social work” (183).

To understand the shape of today’s social work education, it is helpful to return to the words of the first social work professional leaders and educators. Their names and activities are chronicled, at least briefly, in introductory social work texts. Yet we rarely get the full flavor of their ideas, aspirations, and enthusiasm for the education of an emerging profession. This monograph, coming at the beginning of a new century for social work, aims to impart an understanding of where we started, primarily through the words of social work’s pioneers. In the chapters that follow, the founders of social work education speak for themselves; excerpted from speeches and writings, their vision for educating social workers comes alive.