Interdisciplinary Collaboration in Social Work Education in the U.S., Israel and Canada
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The call for interdisciplinary collaboration has become commonplace among health, education, and human service professionals around the world. Social workers in the U.S., Israel, and Canada are often participating in, and/or leading collaborations at the micro level including clinical teamwork, and at the macro level including community development efforts to strengthen case decision-making, services, social conditions, and neighborhoods (Soska & Johnson-Butterfield, 2005). Both public and private funders are mandating inter-group and inter-organizational partnerships (Lawson, Bronstein, McCallion, & Ryan, 2004). Presumably, the synergy created among a diverse group of professionals (and other stakeholders) results in more creative, comprehensive and lasting outcomes (Lasker & Weiss, 2003).


To increase competencies and promote leadership in this growing area, we need to know more about whether and how the concepts and skills related to “interdisciplinarity” and collaboration are taught in MSW programs, and how social work programs work collaboratively within and outside the university. This paper, based on the findings from a cross-country study of professional social work education, allows us to examine the similarities and differences among the U.S., Israel and Canada, while accounting for differences in history and ideology of each country’s social welfare system. In the U.S., social workers are increasingly reporting on interprofessional collaborative
activities, and taking the lead in university-community partnerships (Berg-Weger & Schneider, 1998; Soska & Johnson-Butterfield, 2005). Social workers in Israel have legal mandates to provide personal (clinical) social services and community work; however, issues related to a broader, more effective interdisciplinary approach are being addressed now (IFCD, 2002; Korazim & Klausner, 1989; Sherer & Peleg-Oren, 2005). Interdisciplinary collaboration in Canada has long been common practice in social service and community development, often promoted and shaped by both provincial and federal policies and organizational structure (King & Ross, 2004). Recently, social work professionals and educators have turned their attention to the evaluation of effective interdisciplinary collaborative practice and to the promotion of global practice and international development (Barr, 2005; CASW, 2001).

This paper reports on data collected from an 18-item electronic survey of social work deans and directors in the U.S., Israel, and Canada in 2006. The purpose of the survey was to provide an empirically-based understanding of the status of interdisciplinary activity, knowledge and skill in classroom and field teaching, and approaches to interprofessional work by social work educators and their professional colleagues (Maidenberg & Golick, 2001; Graham & Barter, 1999). The survey went out electronically with a follow-up email reminder and follow-up phone calls to a total of 226 social work programs – 180 on the NADD listserv, 11 Israeli programs, and 35 Canadian programs. One hundred and six programs responded to the survey, yielding a response rate of 47%. Results from this study reveal the most common academic unit with which social work collaborates is education. The most common dual degree program is with law. Social work programs report their universities promote collaboration with the community more than interdisciplinary collaboration within the university. Social work administrators report that Research is the class best suited to teach content on interprofessional collaboration. Deans and directors noted the challenges and supports to collaboration. One social work administrator called the university environment “hostile” towards collaboration. Our paper details all findings and concludes with strategies for social work educators to best prepare students for interprofessional and international practice, to encourage faculty to participate more intentionally within their universities and with outside communities, and to support academic social work administrators in taking proactive interdisciplinary leadership roles.

By synthesizing the reflections of administrators from the U.S., Canada and Israeli Schools of Social Work, we hope to stimulate the replication of this survey in other countries (Hustedde & Calvin,
2003). This will address the universality or culture-specific nature of the methods and meaning of interdisciplinary collaboration so vital to social work education.