

The BSW degree is probably the strongest bachelor's level human service degree you can get. Recognizing what is unique and special about the BSW degree can be of great value in helping you market yourself in today's difficult job market.

First, the BSW is often the only bachelor's level degree that requires an internship or field placement. While field placements don't carry the weight of paid employment, they do count as practical experience and should be placed on your r,sum,. If you have little or no paid work experience, the internship allows you to relate actual practice experience during an interview and can provide you with a reference other than a college professor. This type of reference is most important, because prospective employers want to know what you are like on the job, not what you are like in the classroom.

Secondly, the BSW is the only bachelor's level human service degree that has its educational programs accredited by a national accrediting body, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). None of the other professions accredit at the bachelor's level-only at the master's level. Accreditation insures that graduates of accredited BSW programs have graduated from programs that have met national standards for faculty, instruction, and course work. The accreditation by CSWE is quite rigorous and insures prospective employers that BSW graduates have a distinct and standard body of knowledge.

Thirdly, the social work profession is the only human service profession that promotes the bachelor's degree (BSW) as the entry level degree for practice. All other professions virtually ignore the bachelor's level and promote the master's level as the entry level for practice.

Finally, only the social work profession licenses or certifies practition-ers at the bachelor's level. This makes sense, since the other professions don't accredit bachelor's level education programs and don't recognize that level as the entry level for practice. Most states in the United States either mandate licensure for BSW level practitioners or provide for a voluntary certification. By becoming licensed or certified, you add a credential to your r,sum, that speaks to professionalism and once again insures prospective employers of a level of competence. A state credential-be it mandatory or voluntary-can help give you an edge with prospective employers, as it is something that only BSWs can get and can therefore help to set you apart from other bachelor's level practitioners.

Identify yourself

As strong as the BSW degree is, simply having one doesn't guarantee employment. Many employers don't fully understand the difference between a BSW and other bachelor's level practitioners, which is why you need to be familiar with the difference and use that knowledge when putting together a r, sum, and interviewing. This also means that BSW level practitioners can help themselves by identifying with the social work profession and identifying themselves as social work professionals. Too often, that doesn't happen at the bachelor's level, and graduates don't think of themselves as having any unique skills or abilities or as social work PROFESSIONALS.

Organizations like NASW do much for BSW level practitioners by publicizing the degree and advocating with employers, but the best advocacy is provided by practicing BSWs who have a strong professional identity. Having a great BSW on staff will convince an employer that hiring a social worker is the way to go.

Where are the jobs? Everywhere!

There are vast numbers of jobs available for bachelor's level practitioners, but the types of jobs, the way they are advertised, and the competition for them is very different at the BSW level than at the MSW level. At the MSW level, many jobs have "social work" in the job title or description, and the employers clearly state that an MSW is required. It is obvious that they only want an MSW and will not consider those with master's degrees in other fields. This often is not the case at the bachelor's level. At the bachelor's level, many jobs do not carry the title "social work" and qualifications often simply call for any four-year human service degree. (This gets us back to why it is so important to understand why the BSW degree is unique and strong, as it helps you sell yourself above all the others with four-year human service degrees.)

Jobs for bachelor's level practitioners typically have titles such as habilitation specialist, mental health assistant, group home worker, residential counselor, teaching parent, program coordinator, activity director, workshop director, and so on. Therefore, when looking in the classified sections of newspapers, employment openings for BSWs can be found under almost any heading. If you are a BSW, don't make the mistake of looking only under headings that are titled "professional," "health care," or "social services." Be sure to look under "part-time," "miscellaneous," "administrative/clerical," and the like. Social work jobs can be found just about everywhere in classified ad sections, except perhaps "sales" and "hospitality."

I regularly have BSW students tell me they looked in the paper and didn't see any jobs for BSWs, only MSWs. I'll look through the same paper and see lots of bachelor's level human service positions listed, because I look everywhere and I don't just look for the words "social work." Those agencies that utilize bachelor's level practitioners include, but are not limited to, Departments of Social Services, particularly in rural settings; county health and home health agencies in rural settings; group homes for those who are developmentally delayed, mentally retarded, or emotionally ill; sheltered workshops; and nursing homes.

Be flexible

The BSW degree is more marketable in rural settings than in urban ones, because there is less competition. There are many social service directors in North Carolina, for example, who say they would hire a BSW almost sight unseen, as they simply can't find BSWs. In more urban areas, however, many employers tend not to hire BSWs, as they have so many MSWs applying for their job openings. This may mean that BSW level practitioners may need to relocate or commute to their place of employment much more often than an MSW would.

In addition, a professional-looking and easy-to-read r, sum,, as well as solid interview skills, become even more important at the BSW level and in today's market. With our current political climate, there are attempts to cut many services that typically hire social workers and other human service professionals. This means that competition is stiff, as there are fewer opportunities available for everyone.

Because of the visibility and credibility of the social work profession, social workers as a whole definitely have the edge in the job market. However, a sloppy r, sum, and poor social skills will quickly kill any edge that the profession has created for you.

Keep in mind that in ALL professions, having a master's degree makes one more sought after and carries with it a higher salary. Having a master's degree does make one more marketable in the social work profession, just as in any other profession, but there is a clear and definite market out there for BSWs.

Written by Kathy Boyd, ACSW, CMSW

Knowing what sets you apart from the rest, identifying yourself as a social work professional, knowing where and how to look for employment, and staying flexible in your options should lead you into a lifelong social work career, whether you remain at the BSW level or go on to get a master's.

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