Constructing a Practice-Oriented "Community Social Work" Curriculum in China: A Model for Application-Oriented Talent Cultivation

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Abstract: This paper explores the construction of the "Community Social Work" curriculum in the context of China's socio-political and cultural environment. Rooted in the principles of socialist community governance and application-oriented education. This course responds to the growing national emphasis on grassroots social services and community capacity building. Drawing from a decade of iterative reforms and field collaborations, the course integrates project-based learning, school-agency cooperation, and ideological-political education. This model aligns higher education with local development needs and provides a replicable framework for professional training in social work. The paper also discusses the impact on students and communities, with data illustrating the course's effectiveness.

Keywords: Community social work; Curriculum construction; Practice-oriented education

1. Introduction

Community social work in China has gained increasing attention in recent years due to national strategies emphasizing grassroots governance, social stability, and integrated development. The 19th National Congress of the Communist Party of China highlighted the importance of enhancing community governance systems, which was further detailed in the State Council's directives promoting the "Five-Society Linkage" mechanism [1]. In response, the social work discipline, especially at the undergraduate level, has begun to redesign its curricula to produce professionals equipped for real-world community intervention.

The "Community Social Work" course offered by Tianfu College of Southwestern University of Finance and Economics represents a localized and practice-intensive pedagogical model. It offers insights into how professional education can adapt to the needs of contemporary Chinese society while maintaining academic rigor and professional standards.

2. Course objectives and design

The course is anchored in China's strategic goal to strengthen community governance and public service delivery. It aligns with key national documents such as the "Opinions on Strengthening the Modernization of Grassroots Governance Capabilities" and supports local implementation of the "Five-Society Linkage" (五社联动)—a uniquely Chinese model integrating government, social organizations, communities, volunteers, and professionals [2]. With the development of AI technology, the course content has also been optimized to utilize AI as a tool to lead the course practice. Students can use AI to undertake a series of tasks such as project design. The curriculum fosters a dual focus on technical proficiency and humanistic care, emphasizing the balance between AI efficiency and the warmth of community service.

The main pedagogical objectives of the course include:

(1) In terms of knowledge, to develop students' professional knowledge and skills in direct and indirect community services.

(2) In terms of ability, to enhance their ability to plan, implement, and evaluate community projects.

(3) In terms of quality, to cultivate civic responsibility, professional ethics, and socialist values through integrated ideological and political education.

This course emphasizes not just the transmission of knowledge but the transformation of knowledge into practical community work abilities, addressing the gap between academic training and community work practice. Course content is organized into five thematic modules:

(1) Foundational theory including community history and principles;

(2) Integration of AI technology in community social work;

(3) Practical skill development including community analysis and mapping;

(4) Simulated virtual community practice: using Luyouer APP;

(5) Course project: design, implementation, and reporting.

Each module aligns with specific professional competencies and culminates in hands-on assignments that integrate both field practice and ethical reflection.

Based on the course objectives, the specific task requirements have been further clarified, covering the following four aspects:

(1) Community understanding and observation, visiting a target community on-site, completing tasks such as walking the streets and conducting on-site investigations, and writing a community investigation report;

(2) Demand research, entering the community, and through on-site research and other work, re-examining community life from the perspective of community residents to discover common needs or problems existing in the community;

(3) Service plan formulation and implementation, under the guidance of professional instructors and community instructors, based on the common needs or problems of the surveyed community residents, applying relevant theoretical knowledge and working methods of community work to formulate a community work service plan and apply it to practical activities;

(4) Evaluation and reflection, first, each group summarizes and reflects on the formulated community work service plan and its implementation, and second, each group member conducts self-evaluation and reflection on the course internship.

The course has reached a consensus on the integration of industry and education for talent cultivation with five communities and the social organizations residing in them, jointly exploring the mechanism of integrating industry and education for talent cultivation in social work. Specifically, the innovative practical teaching model

is constructed from the following three aspects:

(1) Highlighting the teaching feature of "mutual promotion between theory and practice," students apply the professional knowledge learned in community work theory courses to guide the course internship, while at the same time deepening their understanding and application of the learned theoretical knowledge during the internship process;

(2) Building a "dual-teacher" teaching team, where the course internship instructors are jointly held by professional instructors and community instructors, among whom the community instructors include community full-time staff with many years of rich community work experience and outstanding social workers;

(3) Implementing the "win-win" cooperation concept, the entire course internship process is set by the community and social organizations, and students answer through eight weeks of on-site community research and practice.

The university, community, and social organizations provide process guidance, guiding students to enter the community, understand the needs of residents, solve the problems encountered by residents, and promote residents' community participation. Through this, students can apply professional knowledge in real situations, accumulate professional experience, and achieve professional growth. At the same time, the internship results of students will also be fed back to the community, providing new ideas for solving community problems and promoting community development [3].

3. Course development and pedagogical innovations

Since its inception in 2012, the course has undergone eleven major revisions. Initially focused on theoretical teaching, it has now evolved into a hybrid model centered on real-world application. This development was catalyzed by systematic feedback from field organizations, alumni surveys, and policy shifts in social service governance.

Central to the curriculum is the use of project-based learning. The course is divided into three learning modules reflecting the professional competencies required by frontline social workers. As shown in **Figure 1**, we have self-designed the course into the following framework.
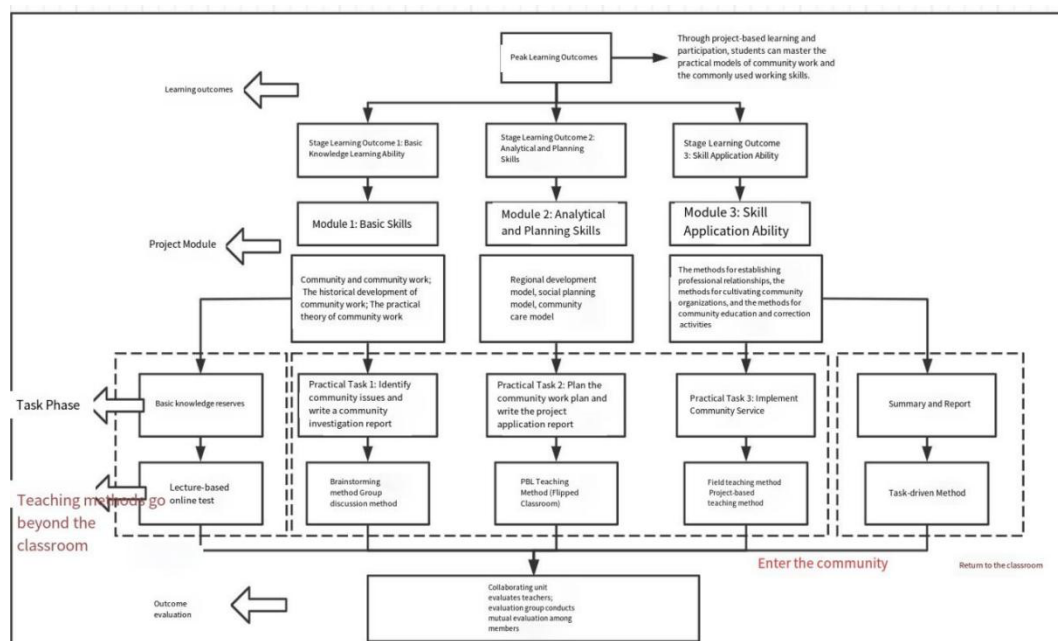

Figure 1. A self-drawn framework diagram of the curriculum

3.1. Student learning outcomes

Student outcomes have been one of the most significant indicators of course effectiveness. As shown in **Table 1**, students gained the following outcomes through this course:

(1) Practical skills: 95% of students reported improved capacity in community needs assessment, project planning, and stakeholder engagement.

(2) Professional identity: 88% of students felt more confident in pursuing careers in grassroots governance or social services.

(3) Civic engagement: Surveys show a 30% increase in students' awareness and willingness to participate in volunteer or NGO work after the course.

Students were able to translate theoretical learning into practice by managing community projects such as: Organizing workshops for children and young parents; Conducting door-to-door needs assessments for left-behind senior citizens; Organizing activities to promote community cohesion. Out of 56 students enrolled in the latest semester, 71% were rated as "competent" or above by field supervisors, and 29% were rated "excellent."

Table 1. Student learning outcome metrics

Outcome metric	Result (%)	Remarks
Improved capacity in project planning	95%	Gained through direct field practice
Increased confidence in professional identity	88%	Reflected in student surveys
Growth in civic engagement willingness	30%	Pre and post-course comparison
Rated "competent" or above in field	71%	According to field supervisors
Rated "excellent" in field	29%	

3.2. Community impact and agency cooperation

The course not only transforms students but also brings tangible benefits to the communities they serve. Over 400 community residents across four districts in Chengdu have directly benefited from the students' projects since 2022. Community issues such as elderly loneliness, children's development, and community isolation were directly addressed. Community committees reported improved satisfaction with services provided and requested ongoing cooperation with the college.

A notable strength of the course is its sustained partnership with over 10 social service agencies. This network allows for continuous co-design of curriculum content, supervision of student projects, and joint evaluation of learning outcomes. Field professionals are required to co-teach, giving feedback on student performance and conducting assessments. Students have directly contributed to program outcomes while enhancing their professional identity during participation.

3.3. Assessment and quality assurance

The course employs a multi-dimensional evaluation system combining formative and summative assessments. It integrates: Class and field work attendance (10%); Classroom theory assignment (20%); Field supervisor assessments (30%); Final examination (40%). According to the 2025 end-of-course survey, student satisfaction reached 100%, and agency satisfaction reached 94%. This framework not only monitors learning but also drives continuous improvement in course delivery.

3.4. Innovations and national relevance

There are three key innovations that illustrate the course's unique contribution.

(1) Reverse curriculum design: Using an Outcome-Based Education (OBE) framework, the course begins with desired community competencies and works backward to determine learning outcomes, teaching strategies, and assessments.

(2) Scenario-based teaching: Simulated community settings and field immersion allow students to practice complex problem-solving in controlled but realistic environments. This pedagogical strategy increases both engagement and retention [4].

(3) Curriculum-politics integration: The course links technical content with moral and political education. We have cultivated students' sense of grassroots service and dedication, which are also essential qualities for a community social worker. This dual focus reflects the Chinese higher education system's emphasis on holistic development and supports the government's goals for cultivating "morally sound, professionally competent" talents [5].

4. Conclusion

The "Community Social Work" course at Tianfu College exemplifies a strategic fusion of professional training, ideological education, and practical engagement in the Chinese context. Its emphasis on real-world projects, localized teaching, and cooperative governance contributes to the national objective of strengthening grassroots service systems.

By cultivating both competence and conscience in future social workers, this curriculum sets a precedent for other Chinese institutions aiming to build impactful, values-based professional education programs.

Disclosure statement

The authors declare no conflict of interest.

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