Edith Abbott and the Chicago Influence on Social Work Education

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Edith Abbott exerted a significant and lasting influence on the shape of present-day social work education. A pioneer in professional social work, and a close associate of Sophonisba P. Breckinridge, Edith Abbott incorporated social work training into the structure and educational policy of a university. In large measure, the curriculum that she designed defined the newly developing profession and widened the boundaries of the social welfare system that she intended the social work profession to direct and staff.

Edith Abbott was a major architect of the present-day curriculum in social work education. After graduating from the University of Nebraska, she came to the University of Chicago to further her education. She earned a doctorate in political economy in 1905, and was an outstanding student. She then spent a year in Boston with the Women’s Trade Union League and the Carnegie Institution, and a year in England studying at the London School of Economics and Political Science, where she came under the influence of Fabian socialists Beatrice and Sidney Webb. A year of teaching economics at Wellesley College followed—an appointment that signified a degree of elitism to the new generation of educated women. Nevertheless, in 1908, at the invitation of Julia Lathrop and Sophonisba Breckinridge, Edith Abbott joined the faculty of the little-known Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy.
to help develop a social research program. She was influenced to return to Chicago by her commitment to coeducation and by the opportunity to live at Hull House, where she expected the vigorous activity of Halsted Street to be “a welcome contrast to the cool aloofness of a New England college for women.”¹ Most important, she returned to Chicago because she saw an opportunity to develop new methods of social research that would relate closely to the professional interests of social workers, and at the same time make social research an integral part of professional education.

Twelve years later, faced with what appeared to be insurmountable financial and curricular problems within the School of Civics and Philanthropy, Breckinridge and Abbott negotiated a merger into the University of Chicago. Abbott became dean of the new School of Social Service Administration in 1924. The transfer of the school constituted a remarkable achievement on the part of Edith Abbott and Sophonisba Breckinridge. Once accomplished, this pioneer undertaking carried heavy risks. Announcement of the new affiliation of the “old School,” as Edith Abbott later reported to her alumni, “was received very coldly and critically by a discouraging number of friends among social workers.”² The School of Social Service Administration was the first instance in which social work education was incorporated into the structure and educational policy of a major coeducational university. Such an affiliation was widely disapproved, not only by followers of Graham Taylor, who with Julia Lathrop had founded the School of Civics and Philanthropy, but by social workers and educators in the eastern part of the United States as well. Reasons for the opposition were embedded within the origins of social work training.

Recognition of the Need for Formal Training

In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, preparation for social work, as had been true earlier for the professional schools of law, medicine, engineering, and teaching, was supplied largely by the apprenticeship system. A new employee in a charitable organization was given instruction from a regular staff member who assigned reading, offered conferences, and supervised the learner in carrying out specific tasks. Obviously no well-rounded view of the whole field was gained. The apprenticeship system operated only in the large charitable organizations of a few cities. These philanthropic agencies trained only the number of persons needed for their own staff turnover. No readiness was shown to train workers from other cities or other agencies.³
Meanwhile, charity organization societies were multiplying, and the need for trained workers was acute. What seems to be the first public recognition of this problem was given at a meeting of the International Congress of Charities, Correction, and Philanthropy in Chicago in 1893, where Anna L. Dawes read a paper on “The Need of Training Schools for a New Profession.” She proposed “... some course of study where an intelligent young person ... [with] an ordinary education ... [and others] already learned in the study of books can be taught what is now the alphabet of charitable science—some knowledge of its underlying ideas, its tried and trusted methods, and some acquaintance with the various devices employed for the upbuilding of the needy. ...”

Public support for charitable agencies was limited, however, and there was little general recognition that philanthropy was work requiring technical skills. Most people in the community were quite willing to see persons without appropriate training and experiences employed by charitable organizations. In an address to the civic club of Philadelphia in 1897, Mary E. Richmond illustrated the problem by citing this incident: A clergyman had written, “You ask me ... what qualifications Miss _____ has for the position of agent in the Charity Organization Society. She is a most estimable lady and the sole support of a widowed mother. It would be a real charity to give her the place.”

Later in that year Mary Richmond read a paper at the National Conference of Charities and Correction entitled “The Need of a Training School in Applied Philanthropy.” She appealed for the development of professional standards based on the common ground of knowledge underlying all charitable work. She proposed that a training school be located in a large city with direct access to philanthropic agencies and, significantly, that any affiliation with a college or university not be allowed to interfere with an emphasis on “practical work” over theory and academic requirements.

The resistance expressed by Mary Richmond to relying on universities and colleges to develop social work training was shared by many leading social workers of that day. They believed that universities had been slow to comprehend the significant service offered by the emerging profession and had shown little inclination to offer direction in the development of social work. James H. Tufts, a professor of philosophy at the University of Chicago, characterized this indifference as due to the fact that social work appeared to be a profession mainly for women. Eastern universities, patterned after the early colleges for men and organized before the days of social work, carried on the academic tradition of preparation only for the professions in which men were engaged. Colleges for women largely followed the curriculum model set in colleges for men.

The scant interest in social work that did exist in academe came mainly from the developing field of social science, and even there,
issues in philanthropy made up a very small part of the curriculum. Beginning in 1884, at Cornell University, Frank B. Sanborn pioneered in instruction on charities and correction, based on his rich experience with the Massachusetts State Board of Charities. His lectures were primarily on the treatment of public dependents which he supplemented with visits to reformatories and insane asylums. At about the same time, Amos G. Warner, general secretary of the Baltimore Charity Organization, was giving some valuable instruction at Johns Hopkins University. Subsequently, Warner gave a course of lectures on charities and correction at the request of Richard T. Ely, the director of the school of economics, political science, and history at the University of Wisconsin. Warner later expanded these lectures and, edited by Ely, they were published in a classic, first standard book on the subject of American charities.  

At Harvard University, in a course titled Philosophy 11, Francis G. Peabody was providing instruction and inspiration that turned many young men to social work. The content of Philosophy 11 included ethics of social reform and questions of charity, divorce, the Indians, labor prisons, temperance, and other problems of “practical ethics.” The suitability of the material for a university curriculum was criticized by other Harvard faculty, and only Peabody's unquestioned reputation in the department of philosophy allowed him to offer the course in the country's oldest institution of higher learning.

Some instruction in sociology and anthropology was offered at the University of Chicago from the time of its opening in 1892. Attention was given to the treatment of defectives and dependents, and gradually material was included on the treatment of crime, the social problems of the great cities, and the amelioration of rural life. Jane Addams, Florence Kelley, and Mary McDowell gave summer lectures. Some universities urged students to volunteer to observe organized charity organizations and settlements that they hoped would serve as laboratories for investigation in the social sciences.

Sociology and Social Work Practice

Warner reported to the International Congress of Charities in 1893 that about a dozen colleges and universities were offering some degree of systematic instruction in charities and correction. Graham Taylor reported that sociology was then being taught in about that same number of theological seminaries with part of the content devoted to charities and correction under the title “applied ethics.” Bruno characterized these developments as the “honeymoon stage” of the inter-relationship between theory and practice, that is, between the teaching
of sociology and the practice of social work. However, as sociology developed further as an academic discipline, it became more concerned with the study of normal human relationships and societal processes and reflected less interest in the social problems that were of immediate concern to social workers. In addition, some university faculty increasingly questioned the value of the charities and correction content in academe. They acknowledged that it was useful for certain practical goals, such as the promotion of good citizenship by arousing the interest of students who could then be expected to promote progressive philanthropy in their own communities. However, they believed the scientific method was little used in philanthropy and that there were serious obstacles to the application of social statistical methods within the setting of charities and correction.

The sociologists' disenchantment with charities and correction was reversed and matched by leaders in charitable organizations who found the social science emphasis on developing theory as insufficient to the kind of help they needed to meet the insistent challenges in their day-to-day problems. As Bruno demonstrated from his analysis of the Proceedings of the National Conference of Charities and Correction: "The numbers of insane were increasing at an alarming rate; children were being brought up in almshouses; the mentally deficient were an increasing menace to the well-being of society; dependency was placing an ever increasing burden on taxpayers, and efforts to treat it were apparently waging a losing battle. . . . [These] were pressing exigencies which could not wait long for an answer."

As a response to these frustrations, the Conference of State Boards of Charities, which had functioned as a section of the American Social Science Association, broke away from that parent body in 1879 to form the National Conference of Charities and Correction. With an expanded clientele and program, it rapidly became a more vigorous organization than the Conference of State Boards had been under the aegis of the social scientists. Significantly, however, upon separating from the Social Science Association, the conference gave up its strong interest in scientific inquiry into social problems. Attention shifted to methods of administering charitable organizations and techniques in giving help to individuals. A minority of papers given at sessions of the National Conference of Charities and Correction continued to deal with theory and the need for research and understanding of problems under consideration. For the most part, "the delegates wanted to know and discussed tirelessly such subjects as: Is it better to care for dependent children in institutions or foster homes, and why? How can the growing number of insane be handled? How can pauperism be prevented? And what to do about it all?"

Edith Abbott saw social work as a discipline separate from sociology. Yet the historical perspective that she brought to all her undertakings
led her to denounce the early break away from social science with its resultant premature concentration on the development of treatment techniques. She was concerned that social theory was then very tentative and much in need of consistent criticism and testing, some of which social workers were in a position to supply. She believed that social workers could and should develop their own competence to determine whether or not certain subjects in the field of social treatment were suitable for a particular application of social statistics. In her view, the diversion from research that was a consequence of social work's move away from social science unnecessarily handicapped the profession for many years in developing scientific methods in social welfare program development and administration.16

The Growth of Social Work Schools

In 1898 the New York Charity Organization Society (COS) took a step toward establishing the kind of professional school that Mary Richmond had called for a year earlier. A six-week summer training course was offered, attended by twenty-seven students representing fourteen colleges and universities and eleven states. The summer course was recognized at once as fulfilling a pressing need and became a regular program of the New York COS for the next seven years. Among the summer students were individuals who became leaders in the emerging profession of social work, such as C. C. Carstens, Kate H. Claghorn, Carl Kelsey, W. Frank Persons, Paul U. Kellogg, Frances A. Kellor, Porter R. Lee, and others.17 This "summer school in philanthropic work" was the only organized effort to provide systematic training for social work until 1903, when the New York COS developed a six-month winter session with lectures in the late afternoon to accommodate social workers employed in the city. The following year, the New York School of Philanthropy was established and a full year of instruction was offered. Edward T. Devine, general secretary of the New York COS, became the first director, and the COS influence was maintained, although the new school had some slight relationship to Columbia University. Permanency and opportunity for growth were assured for the school in 1909–10 by a generous endowment from the will of John S. Kennedy. Although envious of this secure financing of the eastern model of social work education, Edith Abbott welcomed the endowment as an approval of all the schools in their efforts to sustain and extend public confidence in the importance of social work training.18

A school similar to that in New York was established in Boston in 1904 with some tenuous affiliation with Simmons College and Harvard
University. The school was directed by Jeffrey R. Brackett, who had become interested through his service on the New York COS's Committee on Philanthropic Education, and by Zilpha Drew Smith, who, as general secretary of the Boston Associated Charities, had been a dominant influence in the COS movement and a pioneer in efforts to develop training and study programs for her staff.\textsuperscript{19}

The same demand for social work training as in other cities led Graham Taylor of the Chicago Commons and Julia Lathrop of Hull House to establish the Chicago Institute of Social Science in 1903 as part of the extension division of the University of Chicago. The Chicago effort reflected a significant difference from the eastern schools: leadership for the training program had come out of the settlements instead of the COS. The Chicago Institute became a completely independent School of Civics and Philanthropy in 1908.

Almost at the same time that these enterprises were getting under way, interest in social work training found expression in St. Louis in a series of meetings for staff of the St. Louis Provident Association. Regular classroom work for a period of fifteen weeks was undertaken in 1907 and a full year course in 1908. The school, known as the St. Louis School of Philanthropy, began with an affiliation with the sociology department of the University of Missouri. In 1909 it was renamed the School of Social Economy and attached to Washington University, an arrangement that lasted until 1915 when the school was renamed the Missouri School of Social Economy and transferred back to the University of Missouri.\textsuperscript{20}

The success of these four schools led social agencies in three other cities to begin training programs: the Philadelphia Training School for Social Work in 1908, later called the Pennsylvania School for Social Service; the Richmond (Virginia) School of Social Economy; and the Texas School of Civics and Philanthropy at Houston. In 1913–14 these seven schools registered 900 students and granted 167 of them certificates of graduation.\textsuperscript{21}

The Question of University Affiliation

All of the independent schools of philanthropy, except for the Pennsylvania School, at some time had an affiliation of sorts with a university or college. However, the relationship was nebulous, and no institution of higher learning was given a clear responsibility for standards of instruction or other educational policy of the professional schools. All seven were established by the efforts of social workers who feared that universities would “turn out theorists instead of persons equipped
along practical lines.” These social workers wanted their training schools to reflect “the ideals of practical workers rather than . . . those of university teachers.”

Edith Abbott’s preference for locating social work education firmly within the universities was reinforced by papers given at the 1915 National Conference of Charities and Correction. In a speech entitled “Is Social Work a Profession?” Abraham Flexner, a noted authority on medical education, challenged his listeners by questioning the status of social work as measured by criteria for recognizing a profession. Although not doubting that social work involved essentially intellectual operations and not merely mechanical or routine ones, and that social workers derived their raw material from science and learning, Flexner was dubious about how well social work had translated a clear definition of a profession out of that scientific base. Social work appeared to him to be “not so much a defined field as an aspect of work in many fields.” Such breadth of endeavor meant a certain superficiality of attainment. Further, Flexner held, the lack of specificity in aim seriously affected the development of training for social work. An educationally communicable technique was lacking.

Flexner was followed on the program by Felix Frankfurter, who further fueled Edith Abbott’s interest in seeking university affiliation for social work education. Frankfurter called for the same adequacy in training for “the very definite, if undefined profession we call social work” as was required for the established professions of law and medicine. He maintained that schools for social work should seek “a complete association with a university” where there could be intimate contact with the other branches of a university’s work and the school could be part of “a single intellectual community.”

Leaders of the schools of philanthropy responded to the challenge in Flexner’s paper with a determination to redouble their efforts to develop definite methods and technical processes that could be demonstrated and taught as required within a profession. Much of the energy of social work educators and practitioners was soon turned toward that endeavor. No such readiness to accept Frankfurter’s prescription for university affiliation emerged, however. Most of the representatives of schools of philanthropy rejected his view and clung to their belief that standards of curriculum and instruction could be developed best by retaining a close link to social work practice and avoiding any significant sharing of responsibility with universities. Their desire to remain unhampered by the traditions of higher education was increased by their distrust of the prevailing type of instruction in university departments of sociology. World War I accelerated a movement already under way among the social sciences to become more interested in community roles than the usual academic ones. Courses of study were modified to some degree to provide practical training
related to war needs. Sociology departments in fifteen universities cooperated with the American Red Cross in giving emergency training courses in home service—an activity that seemed to social workers to be a part of their domain. Furthermore, leaders in the movement for professional social work education observed that students in sociology rarely were required to obtain clinical experience in social agencies. Observational visits or research assignments to gather data from the files of social agencies made up their encounters with charitable organizations. As a result, in Jessie Steiner’s view, sociologists tended “to underestimate what was involved in learning the techniques of social work. . . . They were not accustomed to regard participation in the work of a social agency as a valuable means of acquiring scientific knowledge of social problems.”26 The resistance among COS leaders to affiliations with universities was very largely based on the fear that universities as research institutions would not place appropriate value on practical fieldwork for students.

So strong was the opposition to schools of philanthropy being moved into universities that the Russell Sage Foundation, which had agreed to award the School of Civics and Philanthropy a new grant, withdrew its offer when the plan to move the school to the University of Chicago was announced, thus seriously endangering the financial stability of the new School of Social Service Administration. Years later Edith Abbott recalled that “it hurts me still to remember how cruelly we needed that money, and how hard it was to do without it.”27

Julius Rosenwald urged Edith Abbott to seek money from the Rockefeller family and lent his influence to a formal request. After two years of negotiation, the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial in 1926 provided a gift of money to use for operating expenses of the school for a period of five years and appropriated an additional $500,000 for an endowment with the provision that the university find a way to match it with $1 million by 1931.28 All through the 1920s and early 1930s, Edith Abbott worked under considerable pressure to help generate outside funds, first for operating expenses and then to ensure the endowment.29

The two-year period of negotiation for the Spelman-Rockefeller grant served as a test of Edith Abbott’s conviction about the proper form for social work education. Beardsley Ruml, director of the Laura Spelman Rockefeller Memorial, had proceeded slowly in relation to the request because of a possibility that the School of Social Service Administration might be able to obtain local funding from the Wiebolt Foundation in Chicago. The proposal for which the Wiebolts were willing to spend up to $500,000 was for a downtown social work “training school” where all the private social agencies would be housed in a center for the practical training of social work. Desperate as she was for funds, Edith Abbott showed a kind of Puritan courage by
rejecting the proposal outright. She saw it as offering only a somewhat more systematic form of the old apprenticeship system and as posing a clear denial of her concept of professional education. Harold Swift, chairman of the board of trustees, and President E. D. Burton matched Abbott’s faith in the proper direction for social work education by giving her assurance that the university would find a way to continue the school’s program even after the expiration of the five-year guarantee given by the former trustees of the old School of Civics and Philanthropy. A significant endowment had been at stake, but Edith Abbott and her close associate Sophonisba Breckinridge, supported by Swift and Burton, did not yield in their determination to develop a model of social work education based on social science theory and research within a major university.

The funding from the Spelman Rockefeller Memorial made possible a period of great growth and development at the School of Social Service Administration. For Edith Abbott it meant a reasonable assurance of permanence for the school, a base from which to attract a strong faculty and to address more substantially than had yet been possible the task of inquiry and publication, and the development of a scientifically based curriculum. Edith Abbott influenced social work education in a major and lasting way, apart from bringing it under the aegis of a university. She supported this achievement, as her published papers show clearly, by serving in large measure as a major designer of today’s social work curriculum. Her differences with the opponents of university affiliation went beyond that single issue and reflected underlying beliefs, objectives, and strategies of social work education that were distinct from those held at the time by leaders in the schools of philanthropy.

The Practice Base

When Abbott and Breckinridge took the School of Civics and Philanthropy into the University of Chicago, social work in a very real sense was synonymous with family casework in voluntary agencies. Prior to the 1920s, caseworkers maintained a primary interest in the social environment and the living and working conditions of their clients. As Roy Lubove noted, casework was then still broadly defined to include any activity that was intended to influence behavior and improve the client’s welfare. “It implied something as simple as a pair of eyeglasses for the youngster troubled by headaches or something as complex as the breakup of a family and the foster placement of the children. Casework services included a summer outing in the country for the tenement child or a new job for the man depressed by his inability to
support his family. It involved relief for dependent widows, a stay in a tuberculosis sanatorium, training in budgeting and household management for the housewife, or guidance for the young girl falling under the allure of the dancehall.32 Although service to individuals was the principal social work undertaking, rather than leadership in social reform, Mary Richmond continued to link the two by insisting that “the champions of casework are the champions of social reform also. . . . They have welcomed and still welcome every change that will tend to make health as contagious as disease, that will increase industrial opportunity, dignify leisure, and enrich the mental and social life of man.”32

Nevertheless, by the 1920s, the early training schools began to invest their curricula with narrow specialization and a concrete practical instruction that subordinated theory and research to an intensive quest for skill and technique. Lubove identified two troublesome legacies that the early schools passed on to future social work educators: specialized, practical education that inhibited the development of broad, scientific training, and caseworker control within the profession with casework as the nuclear skill in social work.33

By the 1920s caseworkers had discovered Freudian doctrine and began to incorporate psychiatric thought and techniques into their work. The revelation of the unconscious, and the idea that social workers could now learn about their clients’ inner life, with its dynamic effects on motivation and behavior, influenced social workers to move away from a form of social treatment based on rational assumptions, information, and environmental manipulation. Skilled casework now required insights into the client’s psyche, and older ways of working suddenly appeared superficial. Psychoanalysis had become the scientific method for understanding the individual. From his analysis of the development of social work as a career, Lubove concluded that the mental hygiene movement and the child guidance clinics of the 1920s played a crucial role in turning social workers toward psychiatrically oriented casework. The fact that the clinics dealt with widely prevalent problems of mental health and emotional adjustment, instead of the narrower problems of economic dependency and relief, appealed to many social workers. They could identify themselves with psychiatry and the clinic team and thereby escape the stigma of charity and relief giving that was associated with earlier social work efforts. The clinic offered the vehicle by which psychiatric social workers could achieve a preeminent position among their colleagues; social casework was now a form of therapy.34

Outside of Chicago the new philosophy of practice began to appear in social work education. Brackett forecast it at the National Conference of Charities and Correction in 1915 by saying that “what is needed most in social work is human beings rich in the subtle, compelling
power of personality." Casework leaders began to view education for social work as a process to affect and mold the student’s personality. The intent was to eliminate attitudes and behaviors that could interfere with casework effectiveness and to add to technical skill in ways that made possible a stronger and more psychodynamically helpful professional relationship. Porter R. Lee, director of the New York School of Social Work, was as fully committed as Edith Abbott to the professional development of social work education. However, sharp differences separated them as to how to define the profession and educate for it. At the 1915 Conference on Charities and Correction, speaking as chairman of the Committee on Education for Social Work, Lee said that “social work, strictly defined, deals with human welfare as affected by the economy of social life,” and he endorsed the importance of training for both casework and scientific investigation of social problems. Later, however, he came to view casework as dominant, and social research as documenting the development of therapeutic techniques. Casework, he said, was “fundamentally the influence of one personality on another . . . a deliberate human relationship at its best.” Social work education was incomplete unless the training process facilitated within the individual student “certain definite personality developments which are quite as important in the practice of social casework as are experience and education in the more limited sense.”

Edith Abbott disparaged the new emphasis on personality, which she saw as accompanied by a downgrading of “knowledge courses.” To her, the new interest was a seriously misguided use of the profession's energy. She had limited understanding of the psychologist’s current conception of personality or the nuances of the client’s psychic life that consumed the interests of psychiatric social workers. She was, in fact, little interested. She had been much influenced early in her education by the writing of J. S. Mill and his interest in the formation of an exact science of human nature and the true causal laws of human character. To Edith Abbott, reason and character, so fashioned as to be steady and constant, should govern behavior rather than psychic life. For her, reality was in the objective environment of the client, in the crowded homes and workplaces of adults and children, in the jails, the inadequate schoolrooms, and the hospital wards they inhabited. Reality for the poor and disadvantaged and handicapped was reflected in rates of unemployment, in the punitive environment of relief offices, and in the incidence of infant mortality. For her, little more needed to be said.

In discussing basic principles of professional education for social work before a large audience at the National Conference of Social Work in 1928, Edith Abbott stated her conviction that becoming truly professional meant following in the footsteps of the so-called learned professionals. “A good medical school is concerned with medical science
and takes little interest in the bedside manner; . . . the law schools . . . properly concern themselves not with the idiosyncrasies or personalities that make for the success of practicing lawyers but rather with the science of the law." No doubt she startled, offended, or amused some of her audience by saying with assurance, "Some of you may not agree with me about this matter of personality but I am convinced that this is only because you are using the word ‘personality’ when you really mean character."39

To Edith Abbott, "character" was superior over "personality." Character was a reliable set of behaviors that enabled the individual, despite obstacles, to react in a consistent way in matters of morality and social justice. One did not need to question or study character—only form it, acquire it. Its components included, as Edith Abbott enumerated them, "honesty, courage, fair and square dealing, respect for human rights and for all human beings even if they are very poor and very troublesome, willingness to make personal sacrifices for a good cause, and above all the ability to assume grave responsibility."40 These qualities, she said, often latent in the student, were the ones the professional school should discover and strengthen.

Edith Abbott wanted "a solid and scientific curriculum in social welfare." With a remarkable show of honesty before faculty of established disciplines, she told a convocation audience at the University of Chicago in the early 1930s that the distance yet to go in social work education was great indeed. "We are still in the early stages of organization, our scientific literature is just beginning to be written, our clinical facilities are still to be developed. . . . The academic curriculum of most of the professional schools is now poor and slight and covers in many schools only the various aspects of a single field—casework. . . . But casework," she emphasized, "is very far from being the whole story. . . ."41

The Chicago Curriculum

The whole story to Edith Abbott included interrelated fields of study of which every social worker should have an understanding. First was social treatment covering the principles of dealing with diverse families and individuals in need of assistance and advice. Social treatment, if not defined narrowly, was the "unique and the most fruitful of the recent contributions of social workers to the social order." Abbott wanted wide boundaries to the conception of "treatment" so that "the application of casework principles to our public services should not be forever neglected." A broad understanding was required—of social psychiatry, social aspects of medicine, immigration, and the principles of penology.
and criminal justice. In fact, she said, social treatment encompasses "the whole science of human relations."42

Edith Abbott believed that there were no more fundamental subjects of study for the social work profession than (1) social legislation bearing on the major problems of social work, (2) the structure of government and its processes, (3) public welfare administration and its history, (4) basic economic principles, and (5) social research. "Must these always be referred to, slightly, as 'background courses'? They are professional courses to be enjoyed not by a well-educated few but by the rank and file who are to carry on our social service traditions in the future."43 Enriched by Breckinridge's background of scholarship in law and political science and Abbott's in history and economics, students were expected to devote themselves to gaining an understanding of statutes and statute drafting, administrative law, the court system, and the economic principles as they applied themselves to questions of social insurance, workmen's compensation, the minimum wage, and family allowances. How else, Abbott asked, can social workers intelligently initiate, support, or reject programs of social reform? Acquiring knowledge about the history of social experimentation involving the lives of human beings was also of first-rate importance. "So little do people know," Abbott said, "of the social reformers of the past and of their work that old experiments are wastefully repeated and outworn theories adopted."44

Unlike most of the training schools for philanthropy, social research and social statistics were basic to the Chicago curriculum. Edith Abbott wanted every social worker to be able to give a competent reading to the statistical literature of the profession and to be able to deal critically with statistical arguments, which she said are "so often and, too frequently, so fallaciously, marshaled in support of some proposed measure of reform." She deplored instances when persons from other disciplines who did not properly understand the purpose and methods of social work were called in to do "special surveys" because social workers were untrained in research and not expected to analyze and interpret their own data.45 Advanced students were expected to engage in social research that could enrich the curriculum and contribute in practical ways to the solution of social problems in their respective localities. They were given unusual opportunities to learn firsthand about the problems of people in a great city, to talk with individuals in their tenement housing, and to identify the strengths of people as well as the ills that overcame those who could not maintain themselves in the rapidly growing industrial society. Students were thrust into a powerful learning situation as they worked under Abbott's and Breckinridge's direction to gather data and to analyze the processes at work in the city's institutions—the courts, the public schools, the jails and correctional institutions, and the hospitals. Much of students' learning stemmed from their
close observation of the exacting and creative way in which Abbott and Breckinridge conceptualized social investigation. Developing a doctoral program of study was a first order of business for Abbott and Breckinridge when they moved the old School of Civics and Philanthropy into the university. A Ph.D. degree in social work was first awarded to one of their students in 1924.

Edith Abbott thought that the provision of adequate fieldwork was the most difficult side of social work education. The great challenge that she saw was the necessity to make fieldwork truly educational. She deplored the confusion between fieldwork and inspection visits, seeing the latter as “purely observational and informational” from which the student gained none of the “actual experience in doing under expert supervision, which is the invaluable asset of properly organized field work.” She believed the question of credit for fieldwork in its somewhat unstandardized condition would pose the greatest barrier to university affiliation for most training schools. She was equally concerned about the “farming out” of students to social agencies without adequate linkage to the academic side of the curriculum. In an attempt to provide a rigorous and integrated learning experience, she moved to employ field instructors as full-time faculty members who supervised students in their agency placements and taught in the school’s social treatment courses as well.

Much of the Chicago curriculum focused on what was closest to Edith Abbott’s heart—“the great field of public welfare administration.” Neither she nor her sister, Grace Abbott, ever fell prey to the legacy of suspicion of government welfare that Lubove found associated with the evolution of social work as a profession. From the beginning of their careers, each was oriented toward the public services. Each was convinced that the great advances in social welfare must come from public rather than private agencies. Each was part of the social class of the Progressive Era that was continually preoccupied with social problems. The Abbott sisters, as part of that class, were problem solvers who sought an understanding of the entire social system and a specialized expertise to deal with it. From Grace Abbott’s position of leadership in the federal government’s Children’s Bureau and Edith Abbott’s role in a great university, each was intent upon expanding and transmitting that expertise and integrating it into government action. Edith Abbott chided social work educators who continued to envelop themselves in the affairs of long-established voluntary social work agencies and resisted the development of public services. “Are we building on the foundation [our first social workers] so wisely laid or have social workers become so concerned about casework methods and such phenomena as the ego libido and various psychiatric diagnoses and such exigencies as community chest financial campaigns that they have lost their sense of responsibility for this great division of public welfare that should be their professional concern?”
Conclusions

The curricula of schools of social work today strongly reflect the broad outlook that Edith Abbott pioneered. Many of the principles about which she spoke and wrote are so generally accepted now that it would be easy to overlook the enormous contribution that she made to education for social work and to the social welfare system. When she and her close associate, Sophonisba Breckinridge, launched social work education within a university, the great developments in public welfare were yet to come. Most social work training schools, keenly preoccupied with casework narrowly defined and with fieldwork in voluntary agencies, still held a very narrow conception of professional education. Edith Abbott’s advanced study in economics and in the history of legal and medical education, and her affiliation with the American Economic Association and the American Statistical Association, gave her a distinctly different perspective than that of other social work leaders of her day. Abbott and Breckinridge believed that they were engaged in a “great experiment” when they undertook to develop a wholly new pattern of professional education for social work.

Notes

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1. Edith Abbott, notes and partial manuscript found in the Abbott Papers, Regenstein Library, University of Chicago.


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13. Brackett, Supervision and Education in Charity, p. 175; Bruno, p. 135.
15. Ibid., p. 8.

17. Carl C. Carstens was director of the Massachusetts Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Children from 1907 until 1920, when he became the first director of the Child Welfare League of America, Inc. Kate Holladay Claghorn was on the faculty of the New York School of Social Work for over seventeen years, where she taught courses in principles and methods of social research and immigration. Carl Kelsey was a professor of sociology at the University of Pennsylvania for many years, and in addition served as assistant director of the New York School of Philanthropy from 1903 to 1913. W. Frank Persons was a long-time member of the board of trustees of the New York School of Social Work. Paul U. Kellogg launched the social survey method with the Pittsburgh Survey, a study of labor conditions in the steel industry. He served as editor of the Survey from 1912 until his retirement. Frances A. Kellar was a social investigator and reformer and an arbitration specialist. Porter R. Lee joined the faculty of the New York School of Philanthropy in 1912 and succeeded Edward T. Devine as its director five years later. His synthesis of ideas from other fields was highly influential in the development of the generic social casework theory at the 1929 Milford conference.

20. Lubove, p. 142.
26. Ibid., pp. 25–27.
29. See, e.g., Edith Abbott to Syndor Walker, April 19, 1931, and Jan. 25, 1937; letters supplied by School of Social Service Administration, University of Chicago.
all in Presidential Papers; Harold Swift to E. D. Burton, June 13, 1924, and Harold Swift to Trevor Arnett, June 20, 1924, Swift Papers).

31. Lubove, p. 80.
33. Lubove, p. 143.
34. Ibid., pp. 85–89.
40. Ibid.
43. Ibid., p. 80.
44. Ibid., p. 56.
45. Ibid., p. 52.
47. Ibid., pp. 351–59.
49. Lubove, pp. 52–54.