

THE INSTITUTIONAL ROLE AND IMPORTANCE OF SOCIAL WORKERS IN HIGHER EDUCATION INSTITUTIONS

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Abstract

Higher education institutions worldwide are increasingly recognizing that academic success cannot be separated from students' psychological, social and material well-being. Social workers, long established in K-12 schools and community agencies, are emerging as essential actors within university systems, yet their institutional role remains under-defined and inconsistently formalized across countries. This article examines the institutional position of social workers in higher education, drawing on international literature and empirical studies to outline the historical development, core functions and growing importance of this practice area. It argues that formalizing the social work role within university structures, through case management, mental health support, crisis intervention and advocacy, directly contributes to student retention, equity and institutional resilience. The article concludes with recommendations for strengthening the institutional recognition of social work in higher education, with relevance for developing higher education systems seeking to build comprehensive student-support infrastructures.

Keywords

Social work, higher education, institutional role, student support.

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1. Introduction

Postsecondary education is widely regarded as a critical pathway to socioeconomic mobility, yet a substantial share of students who enter higher education never complete their degrees. Barriers to retention and graduation are rarely purely academic; they are intertwined with financial hardship, mental health difficulties, family responsibilities, housing instability and the challenge of navigating unfamiliar institutional bureaucracies (Naasko, 2022; Lambert & Siegel, 2018). Social work, as a profession grounded in the person-in-environment perspective, is uniquely positioned to respond to this complexity. While school social work has been an established practice in primary and secondary education for over a century, its extension into higher education is comparatively recent and far less visible as a defined career path (Naasko, 2022).

This article explores why the institutional role of social workers in universities deserves greater recognition and investment. It synthesizes findings from a systematic literature review of social work practice in higher education (Naasko, 2022), foundational work establishing the conceptual fit between social work values and higher education settings (Vonk *et al.*, 2000; Pomrenke & Morris, 2010), a qualitative study of Jordanian university students (Al-Raggad & Alsabeelah, 2025) and professional commentary on

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emerging campus-based social work models in the United States (Lambert & Siegel, 2018), alongside broader debates about the university's role in shaping the social work profession itself (Webber *et al.*, 2014; Ross *et al.*, 2019). Together, these sources demonstrate both the value that social workers bring to higher education institutions and the structural gaps that continue to limit the formalization of this role.

Historical development of social work in higher education

The presence of social work within academic settings can be traced to the early twentieth century, when “visiting teachers” worked to connect home, school and community in response to new compulsory-attendance laws and growing concern for child welfare, later expanding during the Great Depression to address students' material and psychological needs (Naasko, 2022). Its extension into postsecondary institutions has followed a distinct and less-documented path: some social workers appeared on college campuses as early as the 1950s and formal case-management and crisis-response positions expanded further in subsequent decades in response to high-profile campus safety incidents (Naasko, 2022). Despite this gradual growth, systematic data on the scope and prevalence of social work roles in higher education worldwide remain scarce.

Institutional functions and core roles

A systematic review of twenty-eight studies spanning 1971-2022 identified six recurring themes in the literature on social work practice in higher education: the general social work role, field education, mental health, substance use, foster care and diversity/inclusion (Naasko, 2022). Across these themes, several core institutional functions consistently emerge.

Case management and system navigation

Social workers help students navigate unfamiliar academic bureaucracies (registrars, financial aid offices, disability services) while coordinating between student affairs, faculty and external community resources. This function is described as central to improving persistence and graduation rates, particularly for first-generation, low-income and historically underrepresented students (Naasko, 2022; Lambert & Siegel, 2018).

Mental health and psychosocial support

Universities increasingly rely on social workers to address the psychological well-being of students, including those with heightened vulnerability such as international students and student-athletes (Naasko, 2022). Studies from other countries confirm this pattern: in Jordan, for instance, contact with campus social workers was linked to reduced stress and a stronger sense of belonging (Al-Raggad & Alsabeelah, 2025).

Crisis intervention and advocacy

Social workers contribute to institutional crisis-response infrastructure and advocate for policy changes that reduce structural barriers, such as stigma, inequitable eligibility criteria or fragmented referral pathways, that prevent students from accessing support (Naasko, 2022; Lambert & Siegel, 2018).

Field education and professional socialization

Higher education settings also function as valuable field-placement sites for social work students, offering exposure to interprofessional collaboration and macro-level systems work, including internships within opportunity programs serving low-income and first-generation students (Bessaha *et al.*, 2018). However, reviewers note that few social work programs offer coursework specifically tailored to practice in higher

education, leaving students to develop this competence largely through supervised placement experience alone (Naasko, 2022). Related research on supervising international social work students during placements similarly underscores those institutions' responsibility to provide adequate structural support, coordination and training for field educators, since the quality of institutional backing directly shapes placement outcomes (Ross *et al.*, 2019).

International perspectives: A brief overview

International literature converges on a similar conclusion, even though it draws on different national contexts. In Jordan, for example, a study found that trust and confidentiality strongly shaped students' willingness to seek help from campus social workers (Al-Raggad & Alsabeelah, 2025). In the United States, emerging campus-based models emphasize low-barrier access, a consistent case manager and coordination across on- and off-campus services, reframing social work as an integrated part of institutional strategy for retention and equity rather than a marginal support service (Lambert & Siegel, 2018). Comparative debates in the United Kingdom and Finland further show that universities carry a dual institutional responsibility: training competent social workers through models that integrate academic and practice-based learning, while also employing social workers directly to support their own student populations (Webber *et al.*, 2014). Across these different contexts, the same pattern recurs: the institutional design of social work services matters as much as their existence, providing a useful benchmark against which the Azerbaijani context can be assessed.

The Azerbaijani context: Between educational expansion and institutional absence

As in many former Soviet Union countries, social work education in Azerbaijan is still in its infancy. Formal education in the field was established in 2005 and universities across the country currently offer social work education at the bachelor's, master's and doctoral levels (Huseynli, 2022). Despite a relatively high number of graduates from these programs, however, the country continues to lack professional social workers in the field (Huseynli, 2022), a paradox that is directly relevant to higher education institutions: while social work education programs are widespread, dedicated social worker positions supporting students, of the kind documented in case-management and psychosocial-support models in the United States, Jordan and elsewhere, remain largely undeveloped within Azerbaijani universities themselves.

A national study exploring this paradox, based on focus groups and in-depth interviews with government and non-government representatives, universities, students and alumni, identified several contributing themes, including a distorted public image of the social work profession, a shortage of resources in the Azerbaijani language, a shortage of qualified instructors and the absence of minimum national quality standards for social work education (Huseynli, 2022).

At the same time, promising institutional models are beginning to emerge: some Azerbaijani universities have established dedicated centers that integrate psychological consultation, social research and student support functions, an approach that parallels the case-management and psychosocial-support models documented internationally, demonstrating that a university can formalize social work-adjacent functions even before a distinct “university social worker” job title is widely recognized and may serve as a practical starting point for broader institutionalization.

One illustrative example of this emerging model is the Social-Psychological Research and Consultation Center operating within Azerbaijan University, which brings together psychological consultation, social research and direct student support under a single institutional roof. Experience from this kind of center suggests that its mere presence and accessibility on campus shapes students' socio-psychological state in itself: when students know where to turn and trust that the service is nearby and confidential, they are more likely to seek help early rather than waiting until a difficulty escalates into crisis. At the same time, those who do reach out rarely present with a single, uniform problem; visitors bring markedly different difficulties from one case to the next, ranging from ordinary academic stress and adjustment issues to more complex situations involving grief, family conflict or behavioral concerns, which means that such centers must be staffed and organized to respond flexibly rather than through a single standardized service.

For Azerbaijan, two priorities stand out: first, aligning the country's substantial social work education infrastructure with concrete employment pathways inside universities themselves and second, developing the minimum national quality standards identified as missing by Huseynli (2022) in a way that explicitly defines a social worker's role within higher education institutions, alongside using existing psychological-social support centers as pilot models to demonstrate the value of institutionalized student support before scaling nationally.

Challenges and gaps in institutional recognition

Despite growing evidence of impact, several structural challenges limit the formal recognition of social work as an institutionalized function in higher education. First, unlike school social work, which benefits from specialized coursework, certification pathways and professional associations, social work in higher education lacks equivalent infrastructure, leaving practitioners more vulnerable to professional isolation and a weaker sense of identification with the profession, a dynamic long recognized in the broader literature on social workers practicing as “resident guests” within host settings not primarily organized around social work (Dane & Simon, 1991; Naasko, 2022). Second, empirical research in this area remains limited: only eight of twenty-eight reviewed studies employed empirical methodologies, with significant gaps in areas such as sexual misconduct response, pandemic-related service delivery and organizational leadership (Naasko, 2022). Third, service fragmentation across student affairs, counseling centers, financial aid and disability offices continues to create confusion for students about where and how to access support, a pattern documented consistently across both American and Jordanian contexts (Naasko, 2022; Al-Raggad & Alsabeelah, 2025). The 2022 establishment of the Association for Social Workers in Higher Education (ASWHE) marks a step toward professional formalization in the United States, aiming to build a community of practice, offer professional development and generate dedicated research (Naasko, 2022), though comparable professional infrastructure remains largely absent in many other national contexts, representing an opportunity for developing higher education systems to establish institutional models proactively rather than reactively, as was historically the case in the United States following crisis events.

2. Conclusion

The evidence reviewed in this article supports a clear conclusion: social workers occupy a distinctive and increasingly necessary institutional role in higher education, one

that extends well beyond crisis response into case management, mental health support, advocacy and systemic coordination. Their person-in-environment perspective, grounded in social justice values, aligns closely with the core mission of higher education institutions to promote equitable student success (Naasko, 2022; Al-Raggad & Alsabeelah, 2025; Lambert & Siegel, 2018). To strengthen this institutional role, universities should consider: (1) formally defining social work positions within student affairs structures, with clear scopes of practice distinct from counseling and academic advising; (2) investing in visibility and accessibility of services, including transparent confidentiality practices, to increase student trust and utilization; (3) developing coordinated referral pathways among academic departments, counseling centers, financial aid and external community services; (4) supporting field-placement opportunities and specialized coursework so that social work students are prepared to enter this practice area and (5) investing in empirical research to build a stronger evidence base for policy and funding decisions. As higher education systems worldwide confront growing student diversity and psychosocial complexity, the institutionalization of social work is not a peripheral investment but a structural necessity for sustainable student success.

For Azerbaijani universities in particular, institutionalizing the social work role carries distinct significance. As the country's social work education infrastructure continues to expand, embedding dedicated social worker positions within universities themselves would give graduates a concrete professional pathway, help close the long-standing gap between the number of trained specialists and their actual employment in the field and equip institutions to respond systematically to students' academic, psychological and material needs rather than relying on ad hoc or fragmented support. Building on the psychological-social support centers already emerging at some universities, a clearly defined social work role could strengthen student retention, well-being and sense of belonging, while also reinforcing Azerbaijan's broader effort to align its higher education system with international standards of student support.

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