Social Work Degrees Earn High Ranking, but the Whole Story is Even Better

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Shannon Browne, an associate clinical professor of social work (back row, second from left), stands with student volunteers displaying all the types of food that were part of Thanksgiving meal boxes assembled and donated to families for Thanksgiving 2018. Service is an integral component of USU's Social Work program.

Utah State University's Social Work program received a shout-out this week from a company that ranks all sorts of university programs nationwide.

According to SocialWorkDegree.org, a division of SR Education Group, Utah State's bachelor and master's social work degrees are listed in what a spokeswoman described as "our 2019 Best & Most Affordable Social Work Programs in Utah!"

USU is ranked as the most affordable master's degree among Utah's accredited social work programs.

“We are a great deal for students who can clearly expect a healthy ROI (return on investment),” agrees Derrik Tollefson, head of the Department of Sociology, Social Work, and Anthropology within the College of Humanities and Social Sciences.

The “best” ranking, in which USU’s bachelor degree program came in third, is based solely on the average salary a social worker with that degree could expect to earn as a professional. SocialWorkDegree.org lists no other criteria for excellence.

And that’s where they missed the story.

As Terry Peak, Social Work program director, explained, the ranking “focuses on affordability, but our program has individualized attention that is unexpected alongside the affordable.”

The University of Utah tops the “best” category because the projected salary of graduates is the highest, according to Payscale.com. That, however, is looking at just Salt Lake County.

USU Social Work students can be found statewide, in line with USU’s land-grant status, said Tollefson.

Social Work programs, both bachelor’s and master’s degrees (BSW and MSW), are located at eight statewide campuses — Logan, Eastern (Price), Brigham City, Tooele, Blanding, Uintah Basin, Moab and Monument Valley, with more statewide programs in the works.

That’s according to Susan Egbert, a clinical associate professor and the MSW program coordinator for statewide campuses. She’s based at USU’s Kaysville Center.

Egbert said the program has nearly 100 MSW students statewide, most of whom expect to remain in their own communities as social work professionals. The program also contains some 100 students working toward a bachelor’s degree in Logan with another 30 throughout the state.

Many students, she said, transfer from smaller towns to urban areas to continue their education, often remaining there as professionals.

“But there’s an entire group of folks I meet on a daily basis who are not willing to make the sacrifice of leaving their communities because they’re invested there,” she said. “If you bring the education to them, they’ll stay and grow as professionals where they are rooted.”

Peak said the individual attention to students is evident in the program’s practicum placement and supervision. Practicums are required of all social work students, who earn practical experience in the field. “No other school in Utah or the region has as an intensive a process as we do,” she said. “And we are still small enough that we know all of our students.”

The practicum placements are “specific to students’ interests and often result in professional job offers after graduation,” she added.
Since the development of USU’s MSW program in 2008, said Egbert, “we are seeing our graduates grow in their communities and become a very important part of mentoring current students.

“They’re making a huge impact in ways that people who weren’t local to their communities could not, because of their connection and understanding.”

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