

. . . on September 20, 1933, a group of five people sat down and considered . . . their assignment as the first Board of Examiners for the registration and certification of social workers in California, - no, not just California, the first such board in the country.

. . . In fact, it is a matter of record that the Conference began talking about registration in 1920. Then the idea went into hibernation for eight years, then came out again with a rush, this time not in the form of talk but of action. For in 1928 the League of Women Voters had prepared a law for submission to the Legislature of 1939 providing for the registration of case workers in California with a professional education. The league asked for, and got the cooperation of the Conference in this undertaking.

Some of you were learning to walk in 1939 so you don't remember that was the year when the stock market index climbed up and up and up – and then dropped with a crash, leaving former playboys on the corner selling apples, and lines of workers miles long waiting for a bowl of soup. . . . it remained for the years just ahead to unfold the unbelievable tragedy of one out of five persons in these lavish United States receiving some kind of public aid, with the rising tide of operatives in the relief field which would transform the obscure occupation of social worker into one of the most active and controversial in the land, crying aloud to all who heed that there must be regulation and professional direction for the vital young profession.

But in early 1929 this was not known. The bill passed the Assembly and was defeated in the Senate – defeated, significantly, by sudden, violent opposition from social workers, who rallied to overwhelm the bill. The League of Women Voters retired in annoyance . . . and the California Conference of Social Work sat down at its annual meeting of 1929 in Riverside to decide what to do, if anything.

. . .

The tide of the depression and the costs of relief rose, social workers increased astronomically in numbers and in unpopularity with legislators, the Conference became more and more uncertain about registration and less and less hopeful of ever getting a law on the statute books. The project tottered on verge of collapse.

Then in 1932 the Committee came up with the startling recommendation – promptly adopted – that no law be prepared; that, instead, registration be carried on with the Conference as a voluntary project, until the many uncertainties could be cleared up and a bill presented behind a united front. There was to be a special department created within the Conference called the Department of Registration and Certification. . .

In 1933 the newly created Department had its first meeting on Tuesday, May 16<sup>th</sup> in the Jubilee Room (no less) of the Hotel Senator in Sacramento. This time the committee brought out not just recommendations, but a complete set of by-laws for the registration and certification of social workers, together with the names proposed for the first Board of Examiners.

. . . the by-laws, Sec. 9 of which, the so-called grandfather or blanketing-in clause (a clause for which the Conference has taken much criticism because the standards seemed so low) which specified that “For one year after the inauguration of this registration plan any case-worker or executive or sub-executive of a social agency who has lived in California for a period of two years and who has graduated from a High School and who has had at least three years of experience

in an accredited California social agency may be certified by the Board of Examiners as a registered social worker. Thereafter. . . . . the Board of Examiners shall set qualifications based on candidates' expectancy of success."

[The chairperson] reminded the Board of "the ultimate goal of the registration project; i.e. that it would be taken over by the State", and he recommended that only such machinery be set up as would be easily transferable. The work of this and all other boards under the voluntary project was guided by these by-laws. . . and an understanding partially expressed in the by-laws, but really a conviction with its roots in the entire conference, that this was the undertaking of all of us together – all of us social workers, not just a few doing something to raise standards of some of the rest.

. . .

It didn't take the Board many days to decide that the way to begin was not to write all the definitions first. If it had waited for that, it would still be waiting! After a little preliminary discussions, it chose instead an entirely different approach. It simply drew up an application blank, scattered them broadcast throughout the state, and called on all social workers, through every possible avenue of publicity, to register.

When the blanks began to come back, the wisdom of that approach was clear. So was the confusion in the public mind about social workers. There were applications from scores of orthodox social workers, of course, but there were also other scores of applications from persons who honestly thought of themselves as social workers and were so regarded by the community, but who presented the whole question in thoroughly concrete form for the Board to wrestle with. There were applications from nurses, stenographers working in a social agency, teachers, day-workers, hotel managers and business agents hired by social agencies, a few doctors, a few lawyers, chairmen of welfare committees of women's clubs, day nursery attendants, volunteer workers, etc., etc.

And these applications the board went over inch by inch, day after day, month after month, with the help of many, many social workers on the problems raised. . . And so were carved out first steps toward a definition which could be written into law . . . it was sound ground-work for an enduring program. When the law finally passed, there was no opposition or underground attack from social workers. That was the profound wisdom which suggested beginning with a voluntary project. Within the framework of the State, the board could never have felt its way like that.

Concurrently with the blanketing in, the Board had to set up permanent standards to come into force at the end of that first years. . . this was the depression period, when the social work of the country was still being done by thousands of new-comers drafted from a hundred other fields, and the total capacity of all the schools of social work in the country would have accommodated only a tiny fraction of the field. Consequently the Board took a second step, which still admitted to registration by examination persons without professional education, but with certain required substitutes of education or experience. . .

Then came the first examination – the first examination ever given by the professional group itself to test professional fitness. . . There remained the long, long struggle to draft a law and secure its adoption. . .

It was 1945 when the Bill was passed, after seventeen years of unremitting effort. The State Board of Examiners held its first meeting on November 27, 1945.

...

Perhaps many of you wonder why it had to be so slow. Why was it registration and not licensing? . . . if there is a licensing law you can't practice at all without a license, but if there is simply a registration or certification law, there is no limitation on practice, but the certified or registered group have demonstrated professional qualities which permit it by law to use certain professional insignia. The belief is that any social agency, using funds raised by public subscription, would not long continue to employ a staff which either cannot or will not meet the qualification laid down by the state.

But why such liberal standards in those early years?

...

The main reason was not political expediency – it was simply fundamental fairness; fairness to the people who had been social workers before professional education was heard of, fairness to people who had worn themselves thin in the bitter relief days and could not hope to get the gaps in their education mended. Some of these people had been on the job while we more lucky ones were going to our colleges and getting our graduate years – was it really necessary, in order to build a profession to force them out of those jobs into a kind of outer darkness? Did we really have to be in that much of a hurry? And could you close a professional field until the schools could more nearly supply enough workers?

We, unanimously, thought not. We thought, instead, that you could do a better job of building a profession, if all of you together built it, took time enough to it to let some of the new things in it grow into their places naturally, had faith and human tolerance enough to wait – to take “the long view”.

We think it paid – in fact, out of a long, long life of professional experience, I think I am proudest to have been associated with this undertaking which really employed the teachings of social work in all its steps – all those things we learn about not being authoritarian, and so forth.

Now here we are in 1948. Many of those older workers who had only had time or opportunity to get themselves a high school education are gone; professional schools have expanded somewhat, though not enough; the undefined areas have largely been resolved and captured into words; the young workers with professional education are assuming leadership.

What will you do with this profession of yours? Can you save it from the besting snare of professions? – the temptation to add and add restrictions just to keep adding statutes? The only excuse for a profession is that it protects the public well-being – its restrictions must be related to avoidance of malpractice. Can you see that you never forget that?

And have you got the long, long courage to prevent a secret, scheming and ruthless minority of radicals from taking over your profession to use as a Trojan horse? Can you protect your profession against that minority?

What will you do now with this profession you have?

---

Biography from : <https://socialwelfare.berkeley.edu/chickering-fellowship>

Martha Chickering is a distinguished alumna of UC Berkeley and the School of Social Welfare. She first graduated from Berkeley in 1910, the same year she served as President of the Associated Women Students of UC. She returned in 1928 to enroll in the newly accredited social services certificate program in the Department of Economics at Berkeley, the precursor to the School of Social Welfare MSW Program. In 1932 she became the program's director.

In 1936, Martha received her Ph.D. in economics from Berkeley. She was appointed Assistant Professor in Berkeley's Curriculum in Social Service the same year. In 1939 she became the Director of the California State Department of Social Welfare and served in that capacity for six years. Professor Martha Chickering was inducted into the California Social Work Hall of Distinction in 2003.