Foreword

For student readers, book sections such as forewords are often quickly skipped over, while to authors, such sections are laden with statements of intentions and implications. We are aware that many readers of this work will skip this particular section and leap directly into chapter 1. Even so, we wish to say a few words here about the title, direction, and focus of this book.

A number of years ago, a group of social work faculty in the United States who were teaching in the macro practice areas of community organization, management, administration, planning, and policy formed a new association called the Association for Community Organization and Social Administration (ACOSA). In naming the new group, they gave increased visibility to the two-word term that forms the title and principal subject of this book. For many people in the profession, community organization and social administration (COSA) forms the core of their professional interests and commitments, just as it has for many from the earliest days of the profession. This is a book about the practice of social work from that vantage point.

One of the genuine curiosities of the naming conventions of American social science is the durability of the adjective *social*. Combining it with suitable nouns, you can form an astounding variety of disciplinary names and subdisciplinary specialties. Dictionaries and encyclopedias of social

science, university departmental course listings, and other standard sources are full of such examples. One can find everything from *social anthropology* to *social zoology* formed in this way. The field of social work has been an active participant in this naming process. Not only the general name of the profession, but such specialties within it as social casework, social psychiatry, social group work, social planning, social action and social policy, and several more are all prominent on the list. The social work profession was one of the earliest entrants in this language game, signaling in the earliest years of the twentieth century the collective intent of transforming charitable endeavors from leisure-time avocation to *work* or paid occupation.

More recently, social work educators have moved in different directions for the names they have chosen, using such universal and misleading adjectives derived from Latin as micro, mezzo and macro and such references to intent as direct and indirect. One of the recurrent puzzles along the way has been what to call the serious business of planning, creating, operating, and evaluating social agencies. Many people have tried many different solutions. In naming this book, our solution is to apply the rule of parsimony: simplest is best; why use three words or more when two will do as well? So, *social administration* it is.

Now, a brief word about direction and focus. We have sought to present in this work a suitable mixture of the theoretical and the practical aspects of social administration practice. One of us has been engaged in the actual practice of administration for most of the past two decades, while the other has been interested for many years in the state of theory in social administration and related practice topics, together with having extensive experience with boards, teaching, and conducting training workshops. We have sought to bring together in this book our interests in the knowledge, values, and skills of social administration, with greater attention to knowledge and values and relatively less on skill development.

Social work students, in our experience, often show a definite partiality for the apparent certainty of practice skills. They often display a strong belief that knowledge and skill are one and the same thing, and indeed sometimes in social work practice they are. These students believe that they already know what to do; they just need to know how to do it better. Such an approach can work well when one is considering settled practice approaches within established programs, clearly defined services, fixed routines, and standardized expectations.

In the case of social administration, however, social work students usually have little real-world experience with practice of administration and a very limited understanding of what administration is really all about. In this case, immediate focus on the certainty of skill building serves quite another purpose. When faced with the many uncertainties of any largely new subject

matter, it can be tempting to seek out and grasp onto the few certainties that one encounters, including the techniques that those with mastery of the subject employ. In many learning situations such a strategy works well. In learning computer programming, for example, the task is made easier by the knowledge that whatever else you encounter, some version of *If . . . then . . .* conditional logic (usually known as the feedback loop) will arise in some form. Learning to write proper if-then statements is thus a major part of learning any program.

Learning social administration, however, is not like learning computer programming. A learning strategy built heavily around the certainty of discrete skills is not functional in the introduction to social administration. In this case, students unfamiliar with the topic must come to grips not only with their own uncertainties but also with the fact that *uncertainty* as a general condition is one of the defining characteristics of administrative situations. In administration, the practitioner is frequently concerned with establishing programs that do not presently exist, defining services that are currently undefined, creating and establishing routines, and standardizing expectations. In such situations, premature concern for the concrete certainties of skill building without a prior understanding of the broader situation can easily lull the learner and the practitioner into a false sense of certainty where none is warranted. Knowing computer programming or how to write a job description or any of the other technical skills associated with administrative practice does not translate easily into an understanding of the role, scope, and purposes of administration.

In administrative situations, the practical question of what to do is both logically prior to *and more important than* the technical question of how to do it. We do not wish to suggest that the practice of social administration is not filled with the application of discrete skills; quite the contrary. We do wish to suggest however, that much of the technical knowledge of social administration is based on highly subjective preferences and situation- and organization-specific expectations. Mastery of the techniques of a planning-budgeting schema known as Program Planning Budgeting System (PPBS), for example, is of little use today, when almost no one uses it and the practice model of budgeting it embodies can be highly misleading besides. In that rare agency that has implemented a PPBS system, however, technical mastery of these skills is essential.

Stanley L. Witkin (2001), editor of *Social Work,* described this issue in his valediction for Howard Goldstein. He described Goldstein as "chagrined by the trend in some quarters of the profession toward training (rather than education) that reduced social work practice to a contextless grab bag of skills and techniques" (p.105). We share Goldstein's concern and designed this book to provide the context for social administration as well as to introduce a few basic practice skills. As such, our goal is to contribute to the education of the book's readers.