

Does Distance Learning Expand Access to MSW Education in Rural and Underserved Areas and Facilitate Greater Diversity among Social Work Students?

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OBJECTIVE

Distance learning in social work has proliferated in recent years to meet student demand for flexible learning opportunities. Online and blended programs are increasingly promoted as a strategy for diversifying the social work workforce and expanding access to graduate education for individuals in rural and under-served communities. This study assesses the accuracy of these claims by analyzing survey data on recent Master of Social Work (MSW) graduates. Controlling for educational and personal characteristics, we evaluate whether participation in an online or blended MSW program (1) is associated with practice in rural or underserved areas and (2) increases diversity in the field.

DATA/SETTING

Our primary data source is the 2018 GW Survey of Social Work Graduates, a unique dataset containing employment outcomes, job search experience, and demographic and educational characteristics of students graduating with a MSW degree in 2018. This study also uses Rural-Urban Commuting Area (RUCA) codes and Health Professional Shortage Area (HPSA) codes for Mental Health HPSAs to determine whether a recent MSW graduate is working in a rural or underserved area.

DESIGN/METHODS

The first part of our analysis uses the full 2018 GW Survey of Social Work Graduates to examine the distribution of MSWs (N=1,405) in online and blended education across different racial/ethnic groups. Using a Pearson's Chi-square test, we test whether educational program delivery is significantly related to race and ethnicity. For the second part of our analysis we merge RUCA and HPSA codes into the 2018 Survey of Social Work Graduates. Using logistic and ordinary least squares (OLS) fixed effects regression models, we examine whether participation in an online or blended MSW program is associated with practice in rural or underserved areas.

RESULTS

Results from our bivariate analysis indicate that Black/African American and Hispanic MSWs were significantly more likely to be enrolled in an online or blended education program, respectively, compared to White and Other/Multiple Race MSWs. Black/African American and Hispanic MSWs were also more likely to be working full-time during their social work program and tended to be older than the average MSW respondent ($p < 0.10$). Regression results indicate that the odds of working in a rural area are approximately 2.1 and 1.8 times greater for participants in an online and blended educational program, respectively ($p < 0.01$). Distance learning is also positively correlated with practice location HPSA score: using online or blended education increases practice area HPSA score by 3.7 and 2.4 points, respectively.

CONCLUSIONS

Our results indicate that distance learning increases practice in rural and underserved areas by expanding access to professional education in areas where students have limited access to traditional forms of education. Our findings also suggest that distance learning facilitates diversity in the social work profession by providing flexible higher education options to older, working adults.

Key Words: Online education, Master of Social Work (MSW), underserved, rural, diversity

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