

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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BACKGROUND

Online and blended (a combination of online and in-person) social work programs have become increasingly popular in recent years. While online courses have been available for decades, fully online and blended programs are now available from a wide range of accredited Master of Social Work (MSW) programs to meet student demand for flexible learning opportunities.

Existing literature on distance learning in social work has largely focused on the quality and efficacy of online programs relative to the standard in-person delivery model. Coe and Gandy (2000) were among the first to highlight enhanced access to education as a distinct advantage of online MSW programs. Online programs alleviate time and travel constraints for prospective students with full-time responsibilities and offer flexibility to older, working adults—many of whom are already employed in social work jobs (Coe and Elliott, 1999; Reeves and Reeves, 2008; Jones, 2015). Distance learning also expands access to education for individuals in rural areas who would otherwise be unable to travel to traditional on-campus programs.

Beyond creating opportunities for current or prospective social workers in remote areas, expanding access to higher education may also contribute to increasing diversity in the social work workforce. Making professional education available to all prospective students—regardless of gender, race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, or socioeconomic status—creates opportunities for individuals with diverse backgrounds to occupy social work positions that require a master’s degree.

METHODS

Online and blended MSW 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. Our study assesses the accuracy of these claims by analyzing 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. We evaluate whether participation in an online or blended MSW program (1) increases diversity in the field and (2) is associated with practice in underserved areas or rural communities.

The first part of our project 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

KEY FINDINGS

Online and blended programs facilitate greater diversity in the social work workforce:

1. 25% of Black/African American MSWs are enrolled in an online program compared to 15% to 20% of other racial/ethnic groups.
2. 15% of Hispanic MSWs are enrolled in a blended program compared to 7% to 12% of other racial/ethnic groups.
3. Black/African American and Hispanic MSWs are older, and more likely to be working full-time during their degree.

Online programs support practice in rural and underserved areas:

1. The odds of working in a rural area are roughly 2.1 and 1.8 times greater for participants in an online or blended educational program, respectively.
2. Graduates of online or blended programs are more likely to work in higher need HPSAs.

Chi-square test, we test whether program delivery is significantly related to race and ethnicity. For the second part of our analysis we merge Rural-Urban Commuting Area (RUCA) and Health Professional Shortage Area (HPSA) codes into the 2018 GW 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.

FINDINGS

In the 2018 GW Survey of Social Work Graduates (N = 1,405), more than 17% of 2018 MSW graduates completed their degree program primarily online (90% or more) and 12% used a blended format. Students pursuing a blended or fully online MSW degree tended to be older, on average, and had more work experience than students who completed their program in-person. Online and blended MSWs were more likely to be working throughout their MSW degree program and more likely to return to a prior job or organization. The vast majority of in-person MSWs (94%) were working in urban areas compared to 71% of blended and 77% of online MSWs.

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 ($p < 0.10$). Controlling for school fixed effects and individual characteristics, 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 scores. On average, participation in an online or blended program increases the practice area HPSA score by 3.7 and 2.4 points, respectively.

CONCLUSION

Our results from the 2018 GW Survey of Social Work Graduates 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.

POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The proliferation of online education has important implications for the social work workforce and the clients they serve. Online education offers professional opportunities to older students whose full-time responsibilities prevent enrollment in a standard social work program and to current and prospective social workers who would otherwise be unable to access on-campus courses. As a result, online education helps to meet the diverse needs of individuals who reside in areas that would otherwise be underserved by social workers (Coe and Gandy, 2000). Providing specialized training to individuals in rural and underserved areas has a positive impact on service delivery by promoting the “professionalization” of those who are already employed in a social work setting (Coe and Gandy, 2000; Forster and Washington, 2000).

References:

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