

DISTANCE EDUCATION PROGRAMS IN SOCIAL WORK: CURRENT AND EMERGING TRENDS

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This article reports on current and emerging trends in the use of distance education technologies in social work education. Areas studied include the extent of distance education programs, curricular areas covered, technologies used, pedagogical approaches, intentions for degree-program development, sources of pressure to adopt distance education technologies, and policy issues. Results are given for BSW and MSW programs.

FEW CAN DENY the importance of distance-supported learning in higher education today. Colleges and universities are commonly offering courses—and complete degrees—through media such as Web-based online courses, two-way television, and a host of ancillary technologies. Institutional investments in course management programs such as Blackboard/WebCT are extensive. As a result, the ability to support distance education programs has become commonplace within social work education.

A decade ago, a seminal study by Siegel, Jennings, Conklin, and Napoletano Flynn (1998) examined the status of distance learning in social work and foreshadowed the

emergence of distance education as a viable medium for delivering accredited education. Serious efforts to promote online degree programs have evolved since that time (Abels, 2005; Beaulaurier, 2005; McFadden, Moore, Herie, & Schoech, 2005).

Literature Review

In terms of student learning and satisfaction, distance education courses have been found to be comparable to traditional classroom courses (Schoech & Helton, 2001). Rafferty and Waldman (2006) reiterated the need for social workers to stay abreast of communication technologies that support virtual contact

and practice. Distance education has become a critical method of delivering social work education because it has opened access to education for many people, including those in rural areas and in under-served communities, those who are far along in their careers, and those who are financially strained. Social work courses that incorporate current technologies can offer new possibilities for teaching and learning. Recent developments include degree programs that are accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) being delivered entirely via distance education. For example, the University of North Dakota and Texas State University–San Marcos offer a complete MSW degree program online. Florida State University offers an advanced-standing MSW degree online. The Metropolitan State College of Denver offers an online BSW degree. In Canada, the social work faculty of the University of Calgary offers a one-year MSW degree online. In one study, “online student” outcomes were comparable to the outcomes for “face-to-face” students in terms of knowledge and skills gained in class (Wilke & Vinton, 2006).

Similarly, Bellefeuille (2006) found that technology can enhance the learning process particularly in relation to decision making, reflection, and critical thinking; that technology is an effective medium that facilitates a learner’s taking charge of his or her learning; and that distance education takes advantage of human and technologically based learning interactions that expand beyond student and faculty interactions. Likewise, Shibusawa, VanEsselstyn, & Oppenheim (2006) found that computer-mediated technology effectively facilitates the teaching of advanced clinical

skills in working with couples. Also, in a study by Barnett-Queen, Blair, and Merrick (2005), students indicated that online discussions enhanced learning and created a more interactive learning environment.

Conceptual Framework

The design of this study was based on both social work ideals and several relevant theories. As reflected in the existing literature, making resources available and accessible to underserved and remote communities, including the resource of education, is a social work ideal to which technology has contributed extensively. For decades, distance education has linked individuals to social work degree programs. In these times of social worker shortage and economic strain, the increased need for developing social workers with cultural- or community-specific expertise has increased. This study is part of a larger mission to evaluate the current status of distance education as an option for accessing social work degree programs.

Theories of adult learning are relevant to this study (Herie, 2005; Knowles, 1980). Constructs of adult learning theory state that adults are autonomous, self directed, and adults are goal oriented; when adults enroll in a course, they usually know what goal they want to attain; and adults are generally motivated to learn because of internal or intrinsic factors, not external or extrinsic forces (Knowles, 1980). These constructs reflect the types of students who choose to take courses that utilize various forms of distance learning technology. Today, students in professional education are likely to be both goal oriented and self directed, and distance education,

especially Web-based education, suits the learning needs and temperaments of these students (Moore, 2005).

Likewise, instructivist and constructivist theories are applicable to distance education. The instructivist perspective is useful in presenting Web-based on-demand didactic content through lectures and Web sites, and testing through quizzes and exams. The constructivist perspective (which holds that all knowledge is a socially mediated process) finds suitable the use of threaded discussion boards and chatrooms in distance learning. The methods of distance education provide a comparatively safe venue for both learners and instructors to move beyond their usual methods of learning and teaching. Students who do not normally contribute in traditional classrooms may find it safe to contribute to the class through electronic posting (Graham, 1997; Moore, 2005).

Methodology

Given the sustained investments made by social work programs in distance education technologies over the past decade, the Commission on Accreditation (COA) of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) concluded that a survey of current trends within social work education was in order. The Commission wanted to better understand the current state of the art of distance learning efforts, including intentions to offer programs that would award BSW and MSW degrees. COA is charged with the oversight and management of social work accreditation in the United States, and it wished to examine policy positions that might need to be revised before the next educational policy and accred-

itation standards are issued. During the reexamination of the current Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) (CSWE, 2001), this question should be explored: What issues, exactly, ought the Commission—and the social work profession—to consider as more and more programs embrace distance education as an integral and viable form of instruction?

COA defined *distance education* as any means of delivering part or all of a course or courses online or through the Web, or through television or other media where students neither meet physically as in the traditional classroom setting, nor meet simultaneously via one of the aforementioned distance education media. (The term *distributed education* is also in use; our survey treated them as synonyms.)

The Survey Instrument

COA's Committee on Research and Instructional Technology (CRIT) surveyed 501 social work programs about their distance education efforts. The survey was distributed to a single contact (the chief administrator) at each institution with an accredited social work program to avoid over-reporting. Because the COA wanted a complete picture of the efforts currently taking place in social work education, the CRIT determined to take a full census of programs, using the CSWE database. As of the February 2006 COA meeting, there were 326 baccalaureate programs, 48 master's programs, and 127 institutions with both a baccalaureate and a master's program that were listed as accredited in the CSWE database. Using a Web-based survey administration mode allowed the COA to contact every institution at relatively low cost.

The survey instrument consisted of 18 questions for baccalaureate and master's programs and 23 questions for institutions with both programs. The instrument included questions on the current use of distance education technology, intentions or plans to use such technology, and perception of the need for distance education. Those programs that reported "delivering," "developing," or "considering" distance education were asked to further specify the number of courses, course areas, format, and types of technology being used or considered. Branching questions were used to guide programs to the appropriate questions. Two open-ended questions were included for comments on experiences with distance education and issues the COA should consider. Respondents were also asked for demographic information.

The survey was administered in May 2006 using Survey Monkey, an online survey administration platform. Participants were sent a survey invitation through a mass e-mail system (Mail Bomber) with a link to the Web survey included in the cover e-mail. Using the same system, an e-mail reminder was later sent to nonrespondents.

Respondents' Characteristics

Of the 501 schools and programs that received the online survey, 137 (27%) responded. Forty-three states and one territory were represented. Eighty-six responses (62%) were from BSW-only programs. Thirty-two (24%) were from institutions with both a BSW and a MSW program. Nineteen (14%) were from institutions with MSW-only programs. This compared favorably with the characteristics of the industry as a whole: 65% of the 635 accredited programs at that time were BSW-only, 10%

were MSW-only, and 25% were combined programs (L. Weidekamp, personal communication, March 11, 2005). The difference between the respondents and the actual distribution of accredited programs was not significant. (Findings: degrees of freedom: 2; chi-square=1.85. For significance at the .05 level, chi-square should be greater than or equal to 5.99. The distribution is not significant; p is less than or equal to 1.)

Of the 127 respondents who provided identifying information, 106 (83%) were deans and directors, 20 (16%) were faculty, and one (1%) was a staff member. Respondents were asked how long their programs had been engaged in distance education efforts; the mean was 3.7 years, with a range of 6 months to more than 10 years.

Results

Development Status: What Are Programs Doing?

Respondents were asked about the current status of their distance education efforts. These were divided into four categories: programs that were actively delivering developed distance education courses, those that were developing them but not delivering any, those who were *considering* this but not active at the time, and programs who were not considering distance education in any capacity. These data are summarized in Table 1.

The number of programs that were actively engaged in distance education delivery was surprising: 4 in 10 at the BSW level and half at the MSW level. These are well beyond the smaller numbers reported in the 1998 study, and attest to how common dis-

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tance courses are becoming (Siegel et al., 1998). Presumably some of the schools and programs that were already delivering courses were also developing them as well, so the "developing courses" numbers are probably underreported. Of note, the MSW programs appear to be substantially more active in developing courses than the BSW programs. Of these, 2 of 10 MSW and BSW programs are considering distance education courses, suggesting that development and delivery should increase in the future.

If one combines the numbers and percentages for those programs that are currently delivering, developing, or contemplating distance education, 71 BSW programs (61%) and 43 MSW programs (83%) were "open" to using technology to provide courses for their students. This suggests that programs in the main are less resistant to providing courses online than one might suppose. Certainly this is well beyond the more conservative findings from a decade ago.

Curriculum Areas: What Are Programs Teaching?

The Council on Social Work Education specifies eight distinct content areas for study for both the BSW degree and the MSW foundation (CSWE, 2001). Respondents reported teaching

220 distance courses at the BSW level and 133 at the MSW level. The substantial majority of these courses were elective in nature, 77 (35%) for BSW programs and 60 (39%) for MSW programs. In rank order, practice courses were the most prevalent in core curriculum offerings for both MSW and BSW courses. These data are summarized in Table 2.

The prevalence of electives is certainly understandable. Electives offer safe environments where faculty and schools may acquire skills and experience without jeopardizing the core curriculum. More interesting, however, is the presence of practice courses at the top of both the BSW and MSW lists as courses offered via distance education. This is substantially different from the findings reported by Siegel et al. (1998), where only policy and research courses were commonly so offered. Rather than seeing policy and research as primary, online practice courses have become preeminent for the core curriculum.

The areas of social and economic justice and populations at risk, diversity, and values and ethics are much lower in both rankings. This is not surprising as these areas are commonly infused into the curriculum by most programs and seldom offered as courses in their own right. The "field" dimension remains interesting. Perhaps the higher incidence of

TABLE 1. Development Status by Program Degree

| Action | BSW | | MSW | |
|---------------------|----------|----|----------|----|
| | <i>n</i> | % | <i>n</i> | % |
| Delivering courses | 48 | 41 | 27 | 52 |
| Developing courses | 2 | 2 | 6 | 12 |
| Considering courses | 21 | 18 | 10 | 19 |
| Not considering | 45 | 39 | 19 | 17 |

online field courses and seminars for the MSW programs is an artifact of scale; MSW programs usually have more students than BSW programs and may find field liaison, supervision, and seminar duties more efficient when mediated online. This is a plausible explanation, but there remains need of further inquiry.

These data strongly suggest that complete curricula for both degrees are currently available online. A student could conceivably craft a complete course of study for either the BSW or the MSW degree from currently available offerings if there were greater agreement between institutions. We asked all of the respondents if they were considering cooperative degree programs with other universities and colleges. Not one of the respondents reported that they were. At this time, online

education may be viewed as a "place" or "site" by programs for their own students, and hence think of it as firmly located within the program or school. Thus, the industry is "siloed," and collaboration between institutions is the exception rather than the rule. However, the potential certainly exists.

What Technologies Are Being Used?

Distance education technologies have greatly expanded over the past decade. Schools and programs wishing to provide courses online have several choices. Some colleges and universities have well-developed infrastructures that are television based. Dedicated classrooms with audiovisual capabilities between main and satellite locations are commonly used for "narrowcasting." Internet-based programs are also readily available. Combina-

TABLE 2. Courses Delivered via Distance Education

| Required Foundation Curriculum | BSW | | MSW | |
|---------------------------------------|----------|-------------------|----------|------|
| | <i>n</i> | % | <i>n</i> | % |
| Practice | 32 | 14.5 | 38 | 20.0 |
| Policy and services | 31 | 14.0 | 25 | 13.0 |
| Human behavior and social environment | 22 | 10.0 | 19 | 10.0 |
| Research | 15 | 7.0 | 22 | 11.0 |
| Diversity | 14 | 6.0 | 6 | 3.0 |
| Populations at risk/justice | 10 | 4.5 | 5 | 2.5 |
| Field | 10 | 4.5 | 17 | 9.0 |
| Values and ethics | 9 | 4.0 | 1 | 0.5 |
| Subtotal, required courses | 143 | 64.5 | 133 | 69.0 |
| Elective Courses | | | | |
| Electives | 77 | 35.0 | 60 | 31.0 |
| Subtotal: elective courses | 77 | 35.0 | 60 | 31.0 |
| Total, all courses | 220 | 99.5 ^a | 193 | 100 |

^aPercentages do not add up to 100% because of rounding.

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tions of these media choices are certainly possible for many schools. We asked the respondents to identify the predominate technology in use in their programs, and 43 BSW and 25 MSW programs responded. These data are summarized in Table 3.

The Internet is clearly the industry leader in distributed social work education. Given how inexpensive Web and e-mail technology is in comparison with building and maintaining television facilities, this choice comes as no surprise. The larger proportion of television use by MSW programs (32% for MSWs and only 9% by BSWs) may be a function of scale. MSW programs tend to be in larger university settings that may have more capital assets for televised delivery and, more likely, a longer history of investing in technology. Passive, one-way televised programs are virtually nonexistent as a technology choice. BSW programs are more inclined than MSW programs to use combinations of technologies.

Pedagogy: Online and Virtual or Face-to-Face?

The older narrowcast television technologies run in "real time," or what is commonly known as synchronous mode. This results in classrooms that are separated by distance but other-

wise traditional in nature. Yet through e-mail and many of the Web-based course management platforms available today, students and professors need not meet, even virtually, at the same time. Time-delayed instruction, known as asynchronous mode, is entirely possible for many programs. In addition, asynchronous classes may meet face-to-face or through narrowcasting in what are often termed hybrid courses. We asked programs if they were using distance education without face-to-face contact or if a face-to-face component was present. These data are summarized in Table 4.

Social work educators and practitioners often describe themselves as "people persons" who value human encounters. This is an understandable ethos given the nature of our profession. Yet more than a third of the BSW programs and a quarter of the MSW programs did not require a face-to-face experience as an integral component of coursework. Instead, these programs offered courses that were entirely online, without direct human contact.

Future Plans

What plans do programs have for using distance learning technologies? Considering current trends, it is safe to assume that the number of schools and programs that provide distance

TABLE 3. Types of Technology Used to Deliver Courses

| Technology | BSW | | MSW | |
|-------------------------|----------|-----|----------|-----|
| | <i>n</i> | % | <i>n</i> | % |
| Internet/Web | 31 | 72 | 14 | 56 |
| Passive (one-way) TV | 1 | 2 | 1 | 4 |
| Active (two-way) TV | 3 | 7 | 7 | 28 |
| Combined media | 8 | 19 | 3 | 12 |
| Total, all technologies | 43 | 100 | 25 | 100 |

education courses will increase in the foreseeable future. Yet to what extent? Programs may choose to offer only a smattering of electives, for example, or move toward offering complete degree curricula. We asked our respondents about their future plans for distance education. These data are summarized in Tables 5 and 6.

The clear majority of social work programs that responded in this study intend to offer at least part of the courses that are degree requirements through distance education. Fifteen percent of the BSW programs and 21% of the MSW programs intend to offer complete degree programs. This is remarkable, given that only a decade ago programs were just beginning to explore the possibilities of distance education.

Respondents were asked to identify the sources of pressure for adopting distance education. These are summarized in Table 7.

Almost two thirds of the pressure to develop online courses comes from within institutions. This is understandable, given that many colleges and universities have made substantial investments in distance education infrastructure.

Policy Issues

Mindful that the COA will have to evaluate distance education programs as they become available, we solicited qualitative responses concerning policy issues that should be considered. Thirty-eight statements were analyzed as event codes (Bogdan & Biklen, 2003) with the object of isolating specific themes.

TABLE 4. Types of Pedagogy

| Pedagogy | BSW | | MSW | |
|---|----------|-----|----------|-----|
| | <i>n</i> | % | <i>n</i> | % |
| Face-to-face plus technology-delivered (hybrid) | 27 | 63 | 19 | 76 |
| No face-to-face; only technology-delivered | 16 | 37 | 6 | 24 |
| Total, both pedagogies | 43 | 100 | 25 | 100 |

TABLE 5. Extent of Offering Courses via Distance Education: BSW Programs

| Extent of Offerings | BSW | |
|---------------------|----------|-----|
| | <i>n</i> | % |
| Only electives | 12 | 19 |
| Part of degree | 41 | 66 |
| Complete degree | 9 | 15 |
| Total | 62 | 100 |

Each notation was reviewed and abstracted around its thematic contents. Three themes emerged from the data: (1) technological support, (2) development time and resources, and (3) the teaching of practice courses online.

Technological Support

Seven respondents saw the need for technological support as extremely important. One of the myths of distance education is that it is cheap and easy, but in reality the infrastructure needed to provide and support courses “24-7-365” is rather daunting. Following are typical statements reflecting this issue.

- “The university’s technology needs upgrading! Based on evaluation of student outcomes, our distance education students do as well as their campus-based peers,”
- “Technical problems with the TV system to multiple locations, and there is a need for supervision and monitoring of students and their behaviors in multiple locations.”

Development Time and Resources

Ten respondents emphasized the time needed for course development and the necessity of

TABLE 6. Extent of Offering Courses via Distance Education: MSW Programs

| Extent of Offerings | MSW | |
|-----------------------------|----------|-----|
| | <i>n</i> | % |
| Only electives | 8 | 21 |
| Part foundation year | 11 | 29 |
| Complete foundation year | 1 | 3 |
| Part concentration year | 9 | 23 |
| Complete concentration year | 1 | 3 |
| Complete MSW degree | 8 | 21 |
| Total | 38 | 100 |

TABLE 7. Sources of Pressure to Offer Distance Learning

| | <i>n</i> | % |
|------------------------------------|----------|-------------------|
| Internal, within the institution | 37 | 33.0 |
| Internal, within school or program | 34 | 30.4 |
| Combination, multiple sources | 24 | 21.4 ^a |
| Practice community | 12 | 4.5 ^a |
| Total | 112 | 100 |

^aDerived from “other” comments.

having non-social-work consultation expertise available. Their stories chronicled the reality that there is a serious learning curve for developing courses, and that proficiency in distance education requires new skills that are not always directly transferable from the traditional setting. Typical remarks included the following.

- “The primary limit at the moment seems to be the faculty’s inexperience with using the technology, and faculty’s incomplete understanding of the most effective pedagogy for delivery of the material and of the interaction of the students with the material.”
- “We enjoy great support from our university’s IT department, which makes design and implementation doable. We are working on evaluation rubrics for online course delivery and student learning outcomes.”
- “This has been a very effective medium for delivering some of our courses and has been very helpful in reducing commuting time for students. It has allowed us to offer a course that meets the needs of several campuses. Our university does extensive training and offers excellent ongoing support. No one can teach one of these courses without such training. We have been consistently evaluating which courses to have online.”
- “We need to look at faculty workload. This is not only a lot of new course development but also very intensive contact with students one-on-one that takes up a lot of time.”
- “The use of Web courses has been very limited and while the experience was positive for the students, the faculty find it work-intensive to develop such courses with little support from the institution.”
- “At our institution, a major issue that the university is grappling with is how to compensate faculty equitably for online course development and delivery. Intellectual property ownership is among the issues.”

In addition, these colleagues cautioned that fiscal, technical, and professional resources are also needed to provide a high-quality distance education experience.

Teaching Practice Courses Online

The most interesting theme revolved around the question of providing practice courses online. Practice courses were the courses most commonly offered online out of the required curriculum. Yet twenty-one separate comments insisted that practice should not be taught online. Typical comments follow.

- “Distance learning works best with courses that are primarily didactic; does not work well with practice.”
- “We recognize the pitfalls of offering ‘skills’ courses solely through use of technology and we are very aware that this is something we will not be doing. Students

A subtheme within this group directly mentioned workload, compensation, and ownership as significant issues. Typical remarks included the following.

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have expressed concerns about practice-oriented courses being offered only online and we have assured them that this will not happen.”

- “This area needs to be studied and controlled. I do not believe that all courses should be online. I firmly believe practice courses should never be online.”
- “Practice courses appear to present special considerations—how does the student demonstrate skills and attitudes on line?”

One comment summarized this issue very directly.

Social work as a profession utilizes and relies upon the use of self, self awareness, relationships, communication, and relationship building, to name a few. It is important that social workers develop and increase their skill levels in the aforementioned. Any method of instruction that may directly or indirectly compromise or eliminate the observation, supervision, and “human interaction” that I believe are critical for the development of social workers must be avoided in my opinion. The way in which students can relate to and work with others who may differ from themselves is an important part of social work education. Online instruction that does not include direct face-to-face interaction with others does not offer the level of preparation and “practice with individuals” that the profession requires for culturally competent practitioners. Thus, I think

that there needs to be clear evidence that systematic observation of students is incorporated with the use of technology. In addition, I do not support online instruction for courses such as cultural competence, diversity, etc., or direct practice courses.

The current EPAS specify recommended faculty–student ratios, the threshold number of faculty requisite for accreditation, and other resource issues. The characteristics and adequacy of personnel and infrastructure for supporting distance education may need to be added to the standards as significant accreditation dimensions. For example, MSW programs must have a minimum of six full-time-equivalent (FTE) faculty. Just what constitutes a FTE faculty work load in the distance education environment? What if all six faculty members work from different states or countries and never meet face to face? Faculty competencies may also have to be examined. Workload, and its effect on faculty productivity in other areas such as service and research, may need to be better understood in the next iteration of accreditation policy. How does one conduct a site visit when there is no site to visit?

Finally, a most important debate is emerging: Should practice be taught in the distance education environment? This question reflects an undertone that is currently being informally voiced in the profession on various electronic mailing lists and at conferences. On the one hand, some factions insist that practice can only be effectively taught in the face-to-face environment, as this survey saw clearly

in some respondents' remarks. Other research, however, suggests that practice courses and field practica can be effectively incorporated into distance education, possibly mediated by occasional face-to-face meetings. (Ouellette, Westhuis, Marshall & Chang, 2006; Siebert, Siebert & Spaulding-Givens, 2006; Wilke & Vinton, 2006).

Discussion

Several limitations must be kept in mind concerning this study. First, only about one in four schools or programs (27%) surveyed responded, and there is no information concerning those who chose not to respond. It is possible that only stakeholders or those with an agenda chose to reply. We suspect that programs that are either in favor of distance education or opposed to it may have been more likely to participate than those that have not had to adopt a distinct position on the question. Next, as with most surveys, the limits of self-reporting are present; there is no way to confirm validity. Finally, the database that was available for this survey was not comprehensive, although the lack of significance in the distributions of degree types mitigates this concern to an extent.

With these limitations in mind, several salient issues deserve comment. First, it is readily apparent that distance education has expanded exponentially in only a decade. We may well see online programs, some fully independent from classroom contact and others in hybrid combinations, side by side with traditional degree programs in the near future. Universities and colleges are competitive and "siloes." Extramural collaboration is now rare in social work education. Yet the abil-

ity to cooperate to provide degree programs crafted from multiple sources cannot be overlooked as a possible future trend in social work education. Possible federal mandates on the transfer of credits between institutions could fundamentally alter this in the future (Pierce & Pittman-Munke, 2005).

Educational policies and standards for accreditation will have to address the fact that programs are producing degrees in whole as well as in part through distance education. Resource issues will certainly need consideration as a component of new EPAS policies and COA evaluation procedures. There is a lack of consensus concerning the teaching of practice courses through distance education, especially online. The most recent studies in this area reported that although differences between online students and traditional students may indeed be present, these may not be significant enough to warrant concern. Nevertheless, this will frame a most interesting debate and policy challenge in the foreseeable future.

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