POSITION PAPER
Online Master's of Social Work Programs
September, 2013

   For the past few years, the Clinical Social Work Association has been aware of increasing use of distance learning programs for Master's in Social Work degrees. CSWA has been reviewing the possible incongruence between teaching students the skills needed to build empathic relationships and conduct sophisticated biopsychosocial assessments, and the lack of in-person contact needed to teach these skills, found in many distance learning programs. CSWA asked a group of well-known clinical social workers and social work professors to join the CSWA Distance Learning Committee and review the field of online MSW programs. The Committee has provided a Report on what they found regarding the way that distance learning (online and distance learning will be used interchangeably in this paper) affects MSW education. The Report can be found on the CSWA website.

   The CSWA Distance Learning Committee - Laura Groshong, LICSW, Distance Learning Committee Chair; Robin Mckenna, LISW-CP, CSWA Immediate Past President; Kevin Host, LICSW, CSWA Past President; Stephanie Hadley, CSWA President (Ex Officio Member); Jan Freeman, LCSW-C; Joel Kanter, LICSW David Phillips, LCSW-R, Adjunct Associate Professor, Wurzweiler School of Social Work, Yeshiva University; Frederic Reamer, PhD, Professor, Rhode Island College; and Douglas Stephenson, LCSW – spent six months reviewing the following areas of distance learning in MSW programs:

- Education Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) for MSW programs – explicit and implicit standards
- Synchronous and asynchronous coursework and EPAS
- Field placements (development) and EPAS
- Field placements (supervision) and EPAS
- Research on social work distance learning
- Ethical issues in social work distance learning
- Oversight of distance learning programs by the Council on Social Work Education
- Oversight of psychology distance learning programs
- Recommendations

The Committee gathered information through hour-long surveys with deans and administrators of six social work schools and reviews of four other schools through their online program websites. In addition, the Committee did an extensive review of available literature regarding online social work programs; reviewed the CSWE standards for MSW social work education (EPAS) and how they fit with online programs; compared CSWE educational standards with the American Psychology Association Commission on Accreditation online education standards; and reviewed all relevant social work codes of ethics.

This Position Paper is based on the conclusions reached by the Committee Report (found in full on the CSWA website and represents the ways that CSWA would like to see MSW distance learning programs more carefully studied and regulated.

Conclusions

One primary conclusion is that 'implicit learning', which is a major part of EPAS, is significantly curtailed in distance learning programs. While there is variation in the way that schools have developed online MSW programs, the loss of the implicit learning in coursework and field placements is almost universal and may be detrimental to the way that social workers are educated. Further, the decision by one school to admit up to 2000 distance students with no requirements on the way that implicit knowledge is conveyed, is cause for concern.

There is a significant lack of research in the way that online programs differ widely in terms of synchronous/asynchronous/in-person coursework, practicum, in-person student/faculty contact, and in-person student/student contacts. Given the central precept of social work as the guardian of the human connection with an understanding of person-in environment, the changes in online social work education give us pause.

The heart of MSW education is the practicum experience. The way that practicum placements are developed in online programs seems less carefully considered, sometimes leaving the process in the hands of students entirely, and/or locating placements at the last minute. One school is starting to sanction practicum experience that is entirely online. This seems like a major rejection of educating students about how to build human connections and one that should be questioned immediately before other schools follow suit.

There are also ethical considerations that need to be clarified regarding the way that online education may undermine the centrality of the human relationships in social work; the integrity of social work education; and create a conflict of interest in the way that online programs are marketed. The last issue is based on the fact that 75% of schools with online programs use marketing firms to find students without providing the careful review of potential students' fit with social work education and the financial burden attending these programs may represent. The percentage of students which drop out of online programs is significantly higher in some schools than in residence programs.

Recommendations

Here are the recommendations that CSWA makes on distance learning programs:

1. CSWE do a thorough review of coursework and develop standards as to how much should be completed "in-person" in classrooms; social work practice and human behavior course work should especially in reviewed in this context.

2. CSWE do a review of the way that field internships in MSW programs are being established and provide stronger standards for site visits. If supervision cannot be provided by an MSW in an agency, it should at least be provided by an MSW "in-person" who is familiar with the agency and community.

3. Corporate relationships with schools of social work should be fully transparent and student recruitment should not be conducted by any corporation who would financially benefit by the number of students enrolled.

4. Licensing boards ask all applicants for licensure to identify the percentage of the coursework that has been online and consider regulations that mandate a minimum percentage of coursework completed in in-person classroom settings.

5. CSWA host a summit of all major social work organizations in the practice and academic communities to discuss the impact of online education on MSW programs in Spring, 2014.

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