Comparative Analysis of an Online and a Traditional MSW Program: Educational Outcomes

Sherry M. Cummings, Kate M. Chaffin, and Clifford Cockerham

This study compared the educational outcomes of the University of Tennessee College of Social Work’s online and traditional MSW programs (N = 345). Knowledge, skill, and satisfaction outcomes were compared for online and traditional students in 3 tracks: full-time, part-time, and advanced standing (AS). There were no significant differences between online and traditional students in any track for the majority of educational outcomes. Significant differences were found, however, in online and traditional students’ grade point averages (GPAs), field competency ratings, and satisfaction. Traditional AS students had higher GPAs; online part-time students received significantly higher ratings in 6 of 8 field competency ratings; and online AS students were more satisfied with faculty accessibility, helpfulness, and advising. Pedagogical and research outcomes are discussed.

Without a doubt, distance education master’s of social work (MSW) programs have grown tremendously during the past decade. According to the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE; 2012), there are currently 20 distance education MSW programs in the United States. Some of these programs are hybrids that deliver a coordinated mix of face-to-face classes with online instruction. Others use interactive television and satellite locations; however, a growing number of distance education MSW programs are now delivered online. Currently, nine of the CSWE-designated distance education MSW programs are presented online, variously applying interactive synchronous and asynchronous modalities. When discussing synchronous and asynchronous modalities, it is important to note that asynchronous is defined as a course or assignment that can be completed at a student’s discretion during a certain timeframe, whereas synchronous denotes that a class is being held, live via the Internet, and students and instructors participate at the same time. Due to the relative newness of online education, no widely accepted definition currently exists (DeNeui & Dodge, 2006). Online education can be thought of as an approach to teaching and learning that uses the Internet as the primary method to communicate, collaborate, and deliver content (Harasim, 2000; Watson & Kalmon, 2005). In contrast, online education does not refer to standalone educational software that lacks significant Internet-based instruction, nor does it generally include hybrids where a minority of essential content is delivered in...
formats other than the Internet, such as interactive television, radio, and video (U.S. Department of Education Office of Planning, Evaluation, and Policy Development Policy and Program Studies Service, 2010).

Online social work programs have grown rapidly due to students’ heightened demand for flexibility and accessibility resulting from multiple factors, including increased financial pressures, growth in nontraditional families, and rising transportation costs (Anderson & Friedemann, 2010; Maxwell, 2009; York, 2008). Notably, a recent report from the Babson Survey Research Group revealed that admission for online programs in higher education experienced a 10% expansion, whereas traditional programs witnessed only 2% growth (Allen & Seaman, 2011). Additionally, the report notes that nearly 31% of all higher education students currently take online classes. In light of the growing number of social work schools offering online classes and programs, Social Work Today designated online education as one of the 10 trends that have transformed social work. Schools report that the flexibility of online programming makes participation in an MSW program more feasible for many students (Reardon, 2011).

Although online pedagogical approaches have made steady inroads within social work education, some educators caution that online courses can neither replace face-to-face experiences nor provide equivalent opportunities for socialization into the profession (Banks & Faul, 2007; Perlman, Weston, & Gisel, 2010). Critics argue that Web-based approaches offer insufficient personal interaction and collaboration, both of which are vital to the development of essential interpersonal skills valued by the profession (Allen & Seaman, 2011; Perlman et al., 2010). Opponents also assert that online environments do not offer the same opportunity as traditional classroom settings for the dialogue, discussion, and debate necessary for authentic intellectual growth (Brabazon, 2002; York, 2008). Still others criticize online education asserting that unreliable Internet connections result in inadequate learning and decreased student satisfaction (Maidment, 2005). With the rapid expansion of online education and ongoing questions concerning the usefulness of this pedagogical approach, there exists an urgent need for studies that clarify the efficacy and that document the viability of online social work instruction. Despite this obvious need, little research has been conducted on Web-based social work education. The current research study addresses this gap by examining the educational outcomes of a comprehensive online graduate-level social work program and comparing these results with those of its traditional face-to-face counterpart.

ONLINE SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

During the past 15 years, most research assessing the effectiveness of online social work education has focused on specific knowledge-based online classes such as human behavior in the social environment, research, diversity, and human service administration. These studies have focused on similar outcomes, such as knowledge and satisfaction. When comparing online to face-to-face courses, results have been mixed concerning knowledge outcomes. Typically, knowledge is measured through test and assignment scores as well as course grades. These measures have been found to be comparable or better for online students (Cummings, Foels, & Chaffin, 2013; Siebert, Siebert, & Spaulding-Givens, 2006; Wilke & Vinton, 2006). Likewise, the majority of studies examining student satisfaction have revealed either equivalent or, in some cases, superior satisfaction results among students enrolled in the online courses (Banks & Faul, 2007; Faul, Frey,
& Barber, 2004; Hylton, 2006; Ligon, Markward, & Yegidis, 1999; Woehle & Quinn, 2009; York, 2008). Student satisfaction has long been considered an important part of a successful Web-based education (Crowell & McCarragher, 2007; Siebert, Siebert, & Spaulding-Givens, 2006; Stocks & Freddolino, 2000). Research has revealed that some of the features contributing to satisfaction with online courses include ease of technology use, student ability to interact successfully with the instructor, course flexibility, and faculty engagement. Faculty involvement has been cited as critical for helping to develop a strong sense of cohort and easing anxieties that arise in a technological environment (Abdous & Yen, 2010, 2011; Banks & Faul, 2007).

More recently, a couple of studies have also begun to examine the effectiveness of providing clinical social work courses via online education (Cummings, Foels, & Chaffin, 2013; Siebert, Siebert, & Spaulding-Givens, 2006). The results from these studies have shown no significant differences between the traditional and online groups. Specifically, a quasi-experimental study by Siebert, Siebert, and Spaulding-Givens (2006) indicated that teaching clinical skills online is an effective modality. In this study, online and traditional students were enrolled in a crisis intervention course where assignments, post- and retrospective tests, and course evaluations were compared. Students in the online section of this course were required to meet once with a mental health professional affiliated with the university to complete a role-play. This professional was located in or near the community in which the student resided. Although skill development outcomes were similar for traditional and online students, course evaluations revealed less satisfaction among online students. The authors suggested adding synchronous lectures or face-to-face sessions to improve satisfaction. Cummings, Foels, and Chaffin (2013) also compared face-to-face and online students in a clinical group practice course in which knowledge of skills, group processes, and dynamics as well as student satisfaction were evaluated. The findings from this study suggested there were no significant differences in learning outcomes between students in the face-to-face and online classes. In addition, student satisfaction was higher for the online cohort. The online course did include two Saturday sessions to practice group skills. These findings supported the assertion by Siebert, Siebert, and Spaulding-Givens (2006) that adding an interactional segment may improve students’ evaluation of online courses. Although such research addresses the promise of specific online courses for the effective delivery of focused content, there is a dearth of research that examines the effectiveness of entire online programs for delivering quality social work education.

The only study, thus far, that has investigated the outcomes of an online MSW program was conducted at Florida State University (FSU; Wilke & Vinton, 2006). FSU offers a part-time, online advanced standing program for clinical students. The program is delivered primarily online with very limited face-to-face interaction. Educational outcomes of the first two online cohorts were compared with those of their counterparts in the traditional face-to-face program. Pretests examining knowledge, skills, and values were administered to all students at the start of their advanced standing program. Posttests were completed by online and traditional students prior to graduation. No significant differences in knowledge, skill, or value gains were found between the two groups. In addition, evaluation of field skills and final grade point averages (GPAs) revealed no significant differences between the two. Finally, exit surveys revealed similar satisfaction levels for both formats. Although the FSU study demonstrated initial support for the effectiveness of online social work programs, its generalizability is restricted due to the limited nature of the research population (part-time advanced standing students). The current study builds on and extends the existing literature by widening its scope of investigation to the educational
outcomes of a comprehensive online MSW program. Specifically, this study examines and ana-
lyzes knowledge gained, skills obtained, and student satisfaction with an online graduate social
work program encompassing students in the full-time, extended study (part-time), and advanced
standing tracks.

The University of Tennessee College of Social Work (UT-CSW) began its online MSW
program in the summer of 2008 with the admission of a small cohort of part-time advanced
standing students. Since that time, it has added full-time advanced standing students as well as
regular full-time and extended study students. The college offers two concentrations—Evidence-
Based Interpersonal Practice (clinical) and Management, Leadership and Community Practice
(macro)—to both traditional and online students. UT-CSW provides a highly interactive online
learning environment for students in the Web-based MSW program. Online courses use both
synchronous and asynchronous technologies. Blackboard tools such as discussion boards, blogs,
and wiki sites are regularly employed. Synchronous sessions are conducted via the Blackboard
Collaborate platform, which enables the course instructor and students to engage in real-time
lectures, discussion, PowerPoint presentations, and so forth via the Internet. Students engage
in role-plays and small group discussions through Blackboard Collaborate breakout rooms.
Publically available tools allow students to demonstrate practice and clinical skills by creating
short animated films using avatars and recording and uploading annotated role-plays. In addition
to the Web-based approaches, one direct-practice foundation course and two clinical concentra-
tion clinical courses also require very limited face-to-face interaction (e.g., two Saturday sessions
for skill practice and development). No more than one such course is required of any particular
group of online students during a single semester, and the vast majority of courses and semesters
require no face-to-face sessions. The online MSW curriculum is identical to that of the tradi-
tional program in regard to admission requirements and program competencies. The same faculty
teaches in both the online and traditional MSW programs.

An associate dean is responsible for the overall development and functioning of the online
program. The online MSW director administers the program, providing frequent communications
with, and support for, online students; offering guidance to faculty teaching online courses; and
educating the community and potential students concerning the nature and operation of online
education. A dedicated field coordinator for the online MSW program matches online students
with internship placements throughout the state and nationally for out-of-state students, conducts
online field seminars, trains field supervisors, and monitors students’ progress in the field. A full-
time staff person supports the needs of the online MSW program.

METHODS

A quasi-experimental research design was used for this study. Multiple learning outcomes were
compared for all students who graduated from the UT-CSW traditional and online MSW pro-
grams in May of 2011 and 2012 (N = 345). A self-efficacy scale was also administered to all
students after entry into the MSW program and again a few weeks prior to graduation. For this
aspect of the study, a pretest posttest design was employed. The researchers hypothesized that no
significant differences would be found between online and traditional students’ knowledge, skills,
satisfaction, and self-efficacy outcomes. Measures used for this comparison study were those typ-
ically administered to all UT MSW students. Institutional review board approval was received.
Some students who graduated in May 2011 and 2012 did not complete all of the measures used for this study due to the timing of their progress through the MSW program. The number of students who completed each measure is indicated.

Measures

The independent variable was the instructional method (traditional face-to-face vs. online).

**Knowledge-related variables.** Comprehensive exam scores: All students are required to complete and pass a comprehensive exam as a requirement for graduation. To fulfill the comprehensive exam requirement, students must demonstrate the ability to synthesize, apply, and evaluate acquired knowledge by responding to 10 essay questions, each of which is graded on a 5-point scale. At the heart of each of the 10 essay questions is one of the 2008 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) core competencies augmented by advanced program competency knowledge and skills. All essay questions are based on a provided scenario. Students were rated on how well they demonstrated each of the 10 CSWE core competencies and their advanced practice knowledge and skills, as evidenced by answers for each essay. Comprehensive exam results were used for students who graduated in May 2011 and 2012 ($n = 334$). Cronbach’s alpha for this study was .91.

Final GPAs for the graduate social work program were used as a measure of students’ overall academic performance in the MSW program. The GPAs for all students graduating in 2011 and 2012 ($n = 345$) were included for this study.

**Skills-related variables.** Students’ social work skills, as demonstrated by their performance in the field, are evaluated at several points throughout their educational program. All MSW students must complete two field internships—foundation field and advanced (concentration) field. During the last semester of their concentration field, students must demonstrate mastery of all eight advanced field competencies. Each field competency is linked to foundation core and advanced program competencies. These ratings are used to determine students’ grade (pass/field) for advanced field. Field instructors rate students’ progress on each of the eight advanced field competencies using a 5-point Likert rating. All field instructors receive the same training regarding the completion of field evaluation tools, and some of the instructors supervise distance education and face-to-face students. Field instructor ratings of competencies for students who completed advanced field in May 2011 and 2012 ($n = 267$) were used for this study. Reliability alpha = .93.

A revised version of the Self-Efficacy Scale (SES; Holden, Meenaghan, & Anastas, 2003) was used to measure social work students’ confidence in their ability to perform core skills related to practice. The 41-item instrument assesses social work students’ progress throughout the course of their education. The SES is administered to all students at the time of program entry and then again at the time of program exit. SES items were originally based on the 2001 EPAS. A revised version was used for this study to reflect the 2008 EPAS. For this reason, only students who were admitted in the fall of 2010 and who also graduated in May 2012 were included in the SES analysis ($n = 89$). An 11-point rating scale is used (0 = cannot do at all; 5 = moderately certain can do; 10 = certain can do), and possible scores range from 0 to 410. The reliability alpha for the SES in this study was .97.
Student satisfaction. Prior to graduation all students are asked to complete an exit survey, which is designed to measure student perception of MSW courses and faculty. Five-point Likert ratings are used for exit survey items. For the purposes of this study, the following items related to faculty were used: (1) accessibility, (2) helpfulness, (3) major professor accessibility, and (4) major professor advising. Exit surveys were not gathered for all students graduating in 2011; therefore, the results of the exit surveys for the 2012 graduates only (n = 148) were used.

Age, race, gender, track (full-time, extended study, AS), and concentration (clinical/macro) were included as demographic variables. Data for age, race, and gender were collected for the SES, GPA, and field competencies but were not available for the comprehensive exams or exit surveys. Track and concentration information was available for all outcome variables.

ANALYSIS

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize instructional method, educational outcomes, and demographic variables. Bivariate statistics (t-tests or chi square) were conducted to explore demographic differences between traditional and online students. Univariate and multivariate analyses were conducted to investigate differences in educational outcomes by instructional method and to determine whether these outcomes varied by specific track. Repeated-measures analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to compare the difference in pre- and posttest scores on the SES by instructional method and track.

Findings

Of the 345 MSW students graduating from the UT College of Social Work in May 2011 and 2012, 73.9% (n = 255) were face-to-face students, whereas 26.1% (n = 90) were enrolled in the online program. The mean age of all graduating students was 29.5 years (SD = 8.8). Slightly more than 85% were women. The majority of students were Caucasian, and the remainder were African American and other. The largest group of students was full-time, followed by advanced standing and extended study. Most of the students (82.6%) were engaged in the clinical concentration, and the remainder was enrolled in the macro concentration. No significant differences in age, race, gender, track, or concentration were found between the face-to-face and online students (Table 1).

Comprehensive exam scores. A multifactorial multivariate ANOVA (MANOVA) revealed no significant main effects for method or track on scores for any of the 10 comprehensive exam questions. No interaction effects were found. Therefore, traditional and online students in all tracks (full-time, extended study, advanced standing) performed equivalently on all comprehensive exam questions. For the 10 individual items, the lowest score was 3.4 (SD = .8), and the highest was 3.8 (SD = .74). Actual overall scores ranged from 15.00 to 50.0, and the mean overall score for the comprehensive exam was 35.1 (SD = 5.6).

Grade point averages. A factorial ANOVA was used to test the effects of instructional method and track on overall GPA scores. Results indicated a significant main effect for instructional method, $F(1, 303) = 7.4, p < .01$. The GPA of traditional students ($M = 3.75, SD = .02$) was significantly higher than that of the online students ($M = 3.67, SD = .02$). The main effect for track was not significant. A significant interaction was found, however, indicating that
TABLE 1
Student Demographics for All Participants and by Instructional Method \((N = 345)\)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>All Students</th>
<th>Traditional Students</th>
<th>Online Students</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Instructional method</td>
<td>73.9 %</td>
<td>26.1 %</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>86.4 %</td>
<td>84.3 %</td>
<td>92.2 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>13.6 %</td>
<td>15.7 %</td>
<td>7.8 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>74.8 %</td>
<td>74.5 %</td>
<td>75.6 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>African American</td>
<td>19.4 %</td>
<td>19.6 %</td>
<td>18.9 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
<td>5.8 %</td>
<td>5.9 %</td>
<td>5.6 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Program</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Full-time</td>
<td>43.2 %</td>
<td>48.6 %</td>
<td>32.7 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced standing</td>
<td>32.1 %</td>
<td>22.4 %</td>
<td>29.1 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Extended study</td>
<td>11.6 %</td>
<td>29.0 %</td>
<td>38.2 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Concentration</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>EBIP</td>
<td>82.6 %</td>
<td>82.7 %</td>
<td>82.2 %</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MLCP</td>
<td>17.4 %</td>
<td>17.3 %</td>
<td>17.8 %</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. EBIP = Evidence Based Interpersonal Practice; MLCP = Management Leadership & Community Practice.

the GPA scores for traditional advanced standing students \((M = 3.81, SD = .03)\) was significantly greater than that of their online counterparts \((M = 3.65, SD = .03)\), \(F(1, 303) = 15.5, p = .001\). No difference was found in the GPA scores of the traditional and online full-time or extended study students.

**Self-efficacy.** Traditional and online student gains in self-efficacy (i.e., confidence in ability to perform core skills related to practice) from the beginning to the completion of the MSW program were compared. Repeated-measures ANOVA analysis was conducted to determine the main effect of time on self-efficacy and the between-subjects effect of instructional method and time. A significant main effect of time was found indicating that students’ scores on the self-efficacy scale increased significantly from pre- \((M = 33.9, SD = 4.0)\) to posttest \((M = 37.6, SD = 2.8)\), \(F(1, 86) = 18.8, p = .001\). However, there was no significant difference in scores by mode of instruction, \(F(1, 86) = .10, p > .05\). The lack of significance remained when the interaction of time, method, and track was examined. Thus, gain in self-efficacy over the duration of the MSW curriculum was similar for the face-to-face and online students in all tracks.

**Field competencies.** A multifactorial MANOVA was conducted to examine differences in each of the eight field competencies and in the overall field competency rating by instructional method and to determine possible differences in rating scores for traditional and online students in specific tracks. A main effect for method was found in seven of the eight ratings and for the overall rating score, with online students receiving higher ratings than their face-to-face counterparts. The main effects for track were not significant. Pairwise comparisons by program and track, however, revealed that significant differences did exist between extended study online and traditional students, with the online extended study students receiving significantly higher ratings.
TABLE 2
Field Competency Ratings by All Students and by Instructional Method and Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Competency</th>
<th>All</th>
<th>FT</th>
<th>AS</th>
<th>ESP</th>
<th>All</th>
<th>FT</th>
<th>AS</th>
<th>ESP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Assessment</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>.14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Intervention</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>3.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policy practice</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>3.9</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Leadership</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>.77</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ethics</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>.83</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Evaluation</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>.80</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>.08</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>.11</td>
<td>4.0</td>
<td>4.0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advocacy</td>
<td>4.3</td>
<td>.76</td>
<td>4.2</td>
<td>.07</td>
<td>4.4</td>
<td>.10</td>
<td>4.1</td>
<td>.15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sum rating</td>
<td>33.5</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>32.7</td>
<td>.49</td>
<td>33.7</td>
<td>.70</td>
<td>32.1</td>
<td>.10</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Boldface indicates variables with significant differences. FT = full-time; AS = advanced standing; ESP = extended study program; Prof. = professional.

*F score given for significant item rating for specific program type.
*p < .05. **p < .01.

TABLE 3
Exit Survey Ratings by All Students and by Instructional Method and Program

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>All</th>
<th>FT</th>
<th>AS</th>
<th>ESP</th>
<th>All</th>
<th>FT</th>
<th>AS</th>
<th>ESP</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
<td>M</td>
<td>SD</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty access</td>
<td>3.6</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>3.5</td>
<td>.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Faculty support</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>1.0</td>
<td>3.7</td>
<td>.15</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>.22</td>
<td>3.8</td>
<td>.28</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maj. Prof. access</td>
<td>3.1</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2.7</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>3.4</td>
<td>.40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Maj. Prof. advising</td>
<td>3.0</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>2.5</td>
<td>.21</td>
<td>2.3</td>
<td>.31</td>
<td>3.3</td>
<td>.40</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note. Boldface indicates variables with significant differences. FT = full-time; AS = advanced standing; ESP = extended study program; Maj. Prof. = Major Professor.

*F value given for significant item rating for specific program type.
*p < .05. **p < .01.

for six of the eight field competencies and for the overall field competency rating score. No differences were found in ratings for full-time and advanced study traditional and Web-based students (Table 2).

Exit surveys. A multifactorial MANOVA revealed significant main effects for educational method for all four exit survey questions, with online students’ ratings for faculty and major professor variables significantly higher than the traditional students’ ratings for these items (Table 3). Main effects for track and interactions effects were not significant. However, pairwise
comparisons for the interaction effects did indicate that online advanced standing students rated all four faculty items significantly higher than did their traditional counterparts.

DISCUSSION

The current study compared educational outcomes of an online graduate social work program with its traditional face-to-face counterpart and further analyzed outcome differences by specific program tracks. Overall, results indicate that online students performed at least as well as traditional face-to-face students in knowledge attainment and skill development. When examining knowledge outcomes, no significant differences were found in online and traditional students’ scores on the comprehensive exam. As noted above, this exam tests student knowledge and skills related to core program competencies gained throughout the duration of their MSW studies. When examining overall GPA scores, however, traditional students did score significantly higher than the online students. Further analysis revealed that this difference was attributable solely to higher scores achieved by advanced standing face-to-face students compared to their online equivalents. No similar differences were found for online and face-to-face full-time or extended study students. It may be that advanced standing students, who tend to be younger than students in alternate tracks, are somewhat less prepared to handle the demands of online education, which does require high levels of self-discipline, initiative, and time management skills (Faul, Frey, & Barber, 2004). In the study conducted by FSU, which included only part-time advanced study students, no differences surfaced in GPA scores between the traditional and online cohorts (Wilke & Vinton, 2006). The slower pace of study may have benefited part-time advanced standing students participating in the FSU online program. In the current study, we were unable to separately analyze results for part-time and full-time advanced standing students due to the small number of part-time students in this track. Future studies, when possible, should examine potential differences in full- and part-time advanced standing students’ grade-based outcomes. It must be noted that although the advanced standing online students’ GPA scores were lower than those of their face-to-face counterparts, their scores remained strong ($M = 3.65$, $SD = .03$). Although the difference found in GPA scores is statistically significant, the practical significance of this variation is relatively minimal.

The development of competence in general and advanced practice skills is a critical outcome measure for graduate social work students. Pre- and posttest results on the SES revealed significant advances in students’ confidence in their ability to perform core practice skills. No significant differences were found in SES score gains by educational method or track. In spite of this finding, online students did receive significantly higher ratings from their field instructors for their competence in assessment, intervention, advocacy, and evaluation skills and for ethics and professional development. These findings were surprising given concerns frequently raised about the ability of online programs to effectively teach social work practice skills (Kreuger & Stretch, 2000). Additional investigation revealed that the differences in field competency ratings between online and traditional students were all located within the extended study cohorts. After the initiation of the UT Online MSW program in 2008, strong interest was expressed by social service professionals in rural areas who had previously been unable to complete a social work degree due to geographic barriers. Due to the previous dearth of access to graduate social work education, online extended study students may have had lengthier pre-MSW work experience and
greater development of practice skills prior to their entry into the MSW program than did their face-to-face equivalents. If so, higher field competency ratings could be related to differences in previous skill development. However, since the current study did not capture information concerning the nature and duration of students’ work histories, this hypothesis could not be explored. Future research should consider examining students’ prior and current work histories to determine whether such experiences differentially affect the development and execution of social work skills in internship settings.

Results from the current study support previous research findings indicating stronger satisfaction among online students (Crowell & McCarragher, 2007; Siebert, Siebert, & Spaulding-Givens, 2006; Stocks & Freddelino, 2000). However, analysis indicated that these initial findings were due to rating differences provided by students within just one track. Online advanced standing reported significantly greater satisfaction with faculty accessibility, helpfulness, and advising than did the traditional advanced standing students. It may be that advanced standing students, who tend to be younger and less experienced, require and appreciate increased guidance and support during their graduate education. As suggested above, this may be particularly true for online advanced standing students who may not have developed the skills and focus required to operate as independently as the older and more experienced members of their online cohort. The UT-CSW, through its online MSW program director, field coordinator, and dedicated staff person, provides close communication with and ongoing support to its online students. Online advanced standing students may find this help and support particularly necessary and beneficial. Although online advanced standing students may require and appreciate more support during their graduate program than those in the face-to-face program, when such support is received they appear to develop skills and confidence equivalent to their traditional program colleagues.

This study is the first of its kind to compare knowledge, skills, and satisfaction outcomes of parallel online and traditional MSW programs composed of full-time, part-time, and advanced standing students. However, limitations must be noted. This study was conducted at a large public university in the southeast. Students in this MSW program may differ in composition from those attending school in other parts of the country. Therefore, generalization of study results must be made with caution. The same number of students did not finish all measures. The SES, for example, was completed by only 89 students. However, the same proportion of traditional and online students comprising the overall sample also formed this smaller cohort. Our ability to investigate reasons for some of the outcome differences found was limited due to lack of data concerning key factors such as amount and type of previous social work–related experience.

Implications for Social Work Education and Research

Although an increasing number of schools of social work are offering Web-based courses and curricula, there exists a paucity of data examining the effectiveness of online programs for producing suitably trained social work practitioners. In addition, many of the studies conducted, thus far, are preexperimental in design. In the earlier days of Web-based education, such studies helped provide foundational information concerning an instructor’s ability to retain and transfer knowledge to students via an online platform. However, given the proliferation of online programs, more thorough and vigorous studies are now required. Due to the variation in Web-based online platforms and techniques, details of the online technology used and how such technology is employed
throughout the program should be clearly presented. A well-defined description of the students involved should also be provided and results analyzed by relevant student subpopulations.

Findings from the current study indicate that variations in students’ performance in online environments may exist and manifest as a predictable function of identifiable student factors. Experts have claimed that the effectiveness of online programs is linked to the suitability of the program for the intended target audience (Faul, Frey, & Barber, 2004; Wilke & Vinton, 2006; York, 2008). Are there types of students for whom online social work education is the more effective platform and others for whom Web-based instruction presents greater challenges? What specific pedagogical approaches and instructional mechanisms best support students’ abilities to thrive in the online environment? Answers to these questions may provide crucial insight to social work educators’ as they adapt to the inexorable emergence of social work education in cyberspace as a significant pathway of entry into the profession.

The existing conceptual ambiguity concerning what constitutes online education must also be acknowledged. As noted above, there is no one generally accepted definition of what constitutes an online course or program. Some programs classified as online require concentrated periods of in-person sessions (e.g., weekend, week). Other programs include occasional face-to-face meetings for the practice and demonstration of clinical skills. Yet others require no face-to-face meetings at all. A question arises of when should such courses and programs be termed blended rather than online? A blended course has been defined as one containing a mixture of in-person instructor-led and technology-based methods (Bielawski & Metcalf, 2002). However, such a definition fails to provide needed clarity. Further confusion has arisen due to the blurring of lines between traditional and blended courses. Many courses classified as face-to-face increasingly incorporate the use of mobile devices for communication with, and the provision of educational modules to, enrolled students. With the growth of technology increased, discussion is needed to more clearly understand and distinguish among online, blended, and traditional educational modalities. Such definitions are necessary to provide prospective students with accurate information concerning the nature of the programs in which they are enrolling. Definitional clarity is also essential for researchers to adequately measure and compare pedagogical approaches and, thus, for the field of social work education to advance.

REFERENCES


