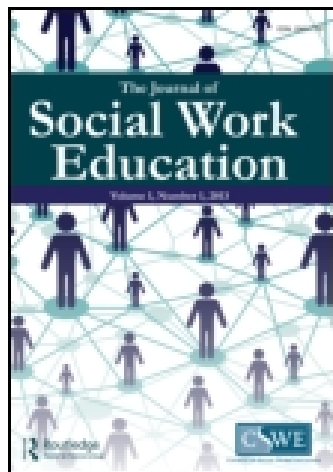




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Distance Learning in Social Work Education

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DISTANCE LEARNING IN SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION: RESULTS AND IMPLICATIONS OF A NATIONAL SURVEY

ELBERT SIEGEL, JOANNE G. JENNINGS, JACK CONKLIN, AND SHELLY A. NAPOLETANO FLYNN

This article reports data collected from a national survey of all accredited social work programs conducted between December 1995 and February 1996. The purpose was to assess current usage of distance learning in social work education. The findings suggest that the use of distance learning has increased, and that the most prevalent issues reported by educators involve adapting instructional material for course presentation and faculty preparation. Implications of the study findings for social work education are also discussed.

TECHNOLOGY HAS radically changed the manner in which academic instruction is delivered at practically every level of education, including social work education (Jennings, Siegel, & Conklin, 1994). Over the past decade many opportunities have emerged for social work educators to use technology for classroom and field work instruction (Conklin,

1993). To date, the profession has utilized audio tapes, videotapes, computers, fax machines, e-mail, and the Internet as part of an instructional inventory (Cnaan, 1989).

Distance learning is another popular venue for technology that can have even farther-reaching implications for social work education and research (Jennings, Siegel, & Conklin, 1994). This article reports the results of a 1995–96 survey sent to all accredited U.S. schools of social work querying their use of distance learning as a medium of instruction. The survey was designed to assess the current “state of the art” of distance learning in social work education and to explore the changes that have occurred since a preliminary study initiated by the authors in 1994 (Jennings, Siegel, & Conklin, 1994).

For the purposes of this article, distance learning is defined as a formal

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manner of teaching or instruction whereby the teacher and the learner are in separate locations most of the time (Jennings, Siegel, & Baskind, 1991; Verduin & Clark, 1991), but are linked by a communications medium, which today includes television, "compressed video," satellite transmission, and telephone lines (Blakely, 1992; Keegan, 1986; Raymond, 1988). Several articles point out that distance learning is a viable method for teaching professionals at geographically separated sites (e.g., Anglin, 1991; Blakely, 1992; Falk & Carlson, 1992; Garcia, 1992; Jennings, Siegel, & Conklin, 1994; Kelley, 1993). Two methods of distance learning are of primary interest here, television and media technology (Blakely, 1992).

In recent years, the gradual incorporation of distance learning technology in social work education has been met with fascination, reservation, and caution. Yet, as distance learning grows in importance in higher education, educators will face increasingly complex choices about ways to prepare future generations of social workers (Freddolino, 1996). How will students become comfortable and familiar with emerging technology and media? Can distance learning offer a partial solution to the faculty workload dilemma without compromising the quality of education?

Recognizing the current trend, the Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) Commission on Accreditation (COA) has grappled with the implications of distance learning technology on numerous fronts, including its effects on educational quality, level of instruction, socialization into the profession, cost for program delivery, and support structures to ensure quality instruction. The COA's development of a set of comprehensive guidelines for distance learning (CSWE, 1995b) reflects these concerns, attempting to balance the rise in popularity of distance learning and the demand for

quality social work education that is accountable to the profession. These guidelines address virtually every area of concern to the commission so that educational delivery is not compromised.

For the past eight years, the authors have been involved with the delivery of social work instruction through distance learning. This experience provides the perspective for this article on issues of planning for delivery, preparing faculty and university personnel, and exploring avenues for expansion.

The Study

The authors sought to repeat their 1994 study to determine changes in distance learning usage. A questionnaire was mailed in December 1995 to the 429 undergraduate and graduate social work programs in the United States listed in the *Directory of Colleges and Universities with Accredited Social Work Degree Programs* (CSWE, 1995a). A second mailing was sent in February 1996.

The 28-question survey instrument explored the following issues: type of distance learning systems used, duration of use, courses offered via distance learning, other uses of distance learning (e.g., agency training and continuing education), issues encountered with distance learning use, faculty training and selection, and demographic information about the institution. The questions were not discrete and respondents could select more than one answer. This deliberately flexible design was intended to provide a wide understanding of the uses of distance learning.

Survey results have been analyzed using a measure of frequency to determine the rate of occurrence for variables such as systems used, problems incurred, courses taught, and the organizational composition of distance learning classes. Also, demographic information has been

cross-tabulated with specific survey results to infer whether commonalities exist within the various social work programs and the institutions offering courses through distance learning media.

Results

Of the 429 institutions sampled, 259 surveys were returned, resulting in a 60% response rate. Forty-one institutions (16%) reported the use of distance learning in their social work school or program. The previous survey (Jennings, Siegel, & Conklin, 1994) indicated that 11% of the 238 respondents used distance learning, resulting in nearly a 5% growth in the use of distance learning in social work education over a two-year period. In addition, the survey found that use of distance learning for continuing education purposes between 1994 and early 1996 more than doubled, from 3% to 8%.

Demographic Characteristics

Large, public institutions which offer combined BSW-MSW programs most frequently reported the use of distance learning. Of the 41 total institutions which reported the use of distance learning in their social work program, 16 (39%) had combined programs, 15 (37%) had baccalaureate programs, and 10 (24%) had master's programs. Thirty-seven of the 41 institutions (90%) were public schools.

Regarding the size of the institutions which use distance learning, 1 had a total student population under 3,000 students; 1 had between 3,000 and 4,999 students; 8 (20%) had between 5,000-9,999 students; 14 (34%) had between 10,000-19,999 students; and 17 (42%) had more than 20,000 students. Thus, the largest percentage of users (22%) were from combined BSW-MSW programs in public institutions with a student body of over 20,000.

Identified Problems

The most frequently reported problems in the use of distance learning were, in order of frequency: adaptation of instructional materials, faculty preparation, faculty interest, student adjustment, scheduling, institutional support, and student-faculty contact (see Table 1). All of these are implementation issues that require the investment of time and applicable resources once a program decides to launch a distance learning initiative.

The questionnaire also sought to identify the most common reasons why institutions do not utilize distance learning. Of the 218 respondents who do not use distance learning, 18% reported no need for it in their program. Other reported reasons included a lack of technological resources (12%) and a lack of faculty training resources (4%) to support a distance learning program. However, 22%

Table 1. Reported Problems in the Use of Distance Education

Problem Area	Reported Frequency (N=41)	Percentage
Adaptation	28	68
Faculty Preparation	27	66
Faculty Interest	23	56
Student Adjustment	22	54
Scheduling	21	51
Institutional Support	19	46
Student-Faculty Contact	18	44

of the respondents who do not presently use distance learning in their social work programs indicated that plans were in progress to develop such a system.

Systems Used

The predominant systems used for distance learning delivery were reported as satellite transmission (42%), television (42%), and compressed video (39%), which involves the translation of analogue signals into digital signals by a computer called a "codec." Additionally, two institutions that use distance learning reported plans to upgrade their current technology to include fiber optics. Presently, 4 of the reporting institutions (10%) use fiber optics in delivering their primary distance learning system.

Courses Delivered

As shown in Figure 1, the most frequently delivered distance learning courses for all respondents were reported as HBSE (51%), policy (46%), research (37%), and methods (24%). BSW programs primarily offered research, HBSE, and methods courses, while MSW programs most often offered policy courses and electives. Both sets of programs reported use of distance learning for seminars for field work educators.

Faculty and Support Staff

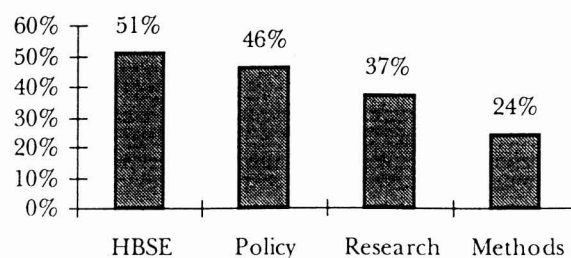
The survey also sought to determine how faculty are selected to teach via distance learning and what support would be needed. Of the respondents who answered this question, 33% ($n=13$) said that faculty were appointed, while 76% ($n=31$) said that faculty volunteered. (Multiple answers were given for these questions.) Approximately 68% ($n=28$) of the respondents who use distance learning reported that they utilize a second person (usually a technician, coordinator, or faculty member) at the receiving site.

We were also interested in teacher training and preparation for distance education delivery. Of the 39 institutions who responded to this question, 54% ($n=21$) reported that faculty who taught courses via distance learning were given additional preparation time. Furthermore, of the 41 respondents, 66% ($n=27$) said that faculty received specialized training in distance education delivery. Twenty institutions responded to the question regarding the process used for specialized training; the predominant method reported by 80% ($n=16$) of programs was hands-on experience.

Discussion

Higher education is in transition from a postindustrial era to an advanced tech-

Figure 1. Reported Courses Using Distance Learning



nological era in which distance learning is an important instructional medium. Social work education has begun to develop new instructional strategies and to diversify its delivery of courses as more colleges and universities use the latest computer, distance learning, and multimedia teaching tools. The results of this survey reflect changes which have taken place in just the past few years.

The data suggest a minimal but growing use of distance learning nationally as a means to reach social work students and offer education to social service agencies. Moreover, there is indication that many social work programs are either thinking of implementing a distance learning initiative or studying its utility for future use. Whether this interest is based on explorations of economies of scale, or the desire to catch up with other institutions, is not clear.

One unexpected finding was the growth of distance learning in continuing education, which more than doubled since the first survey. It is unclear from the data what accounts for this rapid increase, but one can speculate about the reasons for this trend: continuing education courses are easy to implement and market because of few organizational constraints; they are relatively unencumbered by CSWE accreditation standards.

Types and Size of Programs

The survey data clearly show that the larger public institutions (more than 10,000 students) with combined MSW-BSW programs are the most likely to have distance learning programs. Larger institutions can adopt these initiatives, because they are more likely to have planning and development resources available, even during times of budgetary cutbacks. Having this technology allows them to explore areas of potential education markets such as agency training, continuing education (Jennings, Siegel,

& Conklin, 1995), outreach efforts, or consortia ventures with other social work programs. They can also offer professional courses for students at various receiving sites to meet convenience needs.

Types of Courses Offered

Given the emphasis in social work education on the development of students' relationship and interactional skills, it is not surprising that the most frequent courses offered via distance learning are HBSE, social welfare policy, and research courses, in that order. These "noninteractional" courses seem easier to launch, since much of the content lends itself to lecture presentations. The development of knowledge content and introduction and application of theories make these courses readily adaptable for distance education.

The least attractive courses appear to be methods or practice courses. The predisposition in social work education that we cannot or should not offer practice or field integration seminar courses via distance learning technology (because they are considered interactional in nature and content) reinforces this finding. Although there is no hard data, social work educators seem to have a strong bias that the content of these courses can only be introduced, conveyed, and reinforced through face-to-face learning. Some anecdotal evidence suggests, however, that practice courses are being offered with this technology.

Range and Types of Distance Learning

Since development, cost, installation, and maintenance of distance learning technology is high, universities are the predominant purchasers and owners of this system. It appears that social work programs do not have the resources to implement a full audio/video one-way or two-way system. Hence, social work pro-

grams report using whatever their larger institution uses.

Respondents indicated using several types of distance learning technology; in some cases a university used different types. There is no single "standard" type of distance education medium at present. As noted earlier, technologies currently used include television studio and satellite transmission, compressed video over high-speed telephone lines, fiber optic transmission, videotaping, and computerized curriculum materials exchanged via the Internet as part of correspondence courses.

Data suggest a minimal but growing use of distance learning nationally in social work education, with unexpected growth in use for continuing education.

It was beyond the purpose of this survey to ascertain why a university chooses a particular type of technology. However, this decision is crucial to any social work program when it ventures into this instructional modality. Financial considerations are often the guiding decision factor for university officials, which leads to the risk that little consideration is given for technological alternatives that may be more cost-effective in the long run.

The results also indicate that universities (and, by extension, schools of social work) may be establishing various distance learning systems which are not yet compatible. A possible future initiative would involve coordinating efforts between systems so that educators can communicate with one another. Video conferencing and use of the internet are first steps toward achieving some measure of coordination.

Barriers to Distance Education

The main barriers to establishing a distance learning program are threefold. The first is the costs associated with the development and purchase of technology for transmission, building studios, training teachers to understand and effectively use the technology for instruction, and providing ancillary support services. Often these costs can be prohibitive for the university or for the social work program.

Second are philosophic barriers. Distance learning is relatively new and has not been embraced with great enthusiasm by the majority of social work educators. Often it is viewed with suspicion and as a nontraditional method that needs to be approached with caution. If one does not teach "face-to-face," as is the norm in our profession, how much is lost in the perceived quality of the classroom interaction, in the potential socialization of students, and in the relationship with the instructor as a mentor and role model? Social work has indeed been careful about redefining the meaning of this relationship. Yet other professional disciplines (e.g., computer science, medicine, psychology, engineering, and the sciences) are moving forward with distance education with relative ease (University of Connecticut, 1996). This calls for training initiatives. Besides learning how to plan and present a distance learning course, the social work instructor needs to develop familiarity with the technology and the equipment.

From a philosophical point of view, some schools of social work may be ill-prepared to make a paradigm shift to modify traditional classroom and field teaching with multimedia or technologically assisted education (Bennis, 1990; Covey, 1989; Merriam, 1991; Peters & Waterman, 1982). Adaptation to newer teaching methodologies takes time. For

many years even the use of computers was slowly accepted within the educational community (Cnaan, 1989). When its potential for research purposes, information storage and retrieval, and communication became clear, though, it was embraced quickly. But because distance education can help effective teaching more than research, it may face a slower acceptance time.

A third barrier to distance learning involves a lack of recognition that technical support is necessary to assist the instructor. A second person at the receiving site is critical both for teaching and for helping with technical aspects, and this can mean additional costs.

Anecdotal responses offered by a number of respondents presented other perspectives, as well. Some programs did not find a need for distance learning because their students were geographically proximate to the campus. Presumably, some believe distance education is useful solely in less accessible rural areas (Raymond, 1988) and not as a way of linking the student to the classroom, no matter the distance. However, universities could use neighboring institutions as receiving sites to offer courses that would be convenient for students who are often burdened with family, work, education, and social responsibilities (Jennings, Siegel, & Conklin, 1994) and who often constitute our part-time student market (Weinbach, Gandy, & Tartaglia, 1984).

Accreditation

Consistency with accreditation standards and concern with CSWE's perception of the program was not seen as a barrier by most of the respondents. Accreditation standards have led to relative consistency among social work programs. When properly handled in accordance with evaluative standards, distance learn-

ing initiatives should not pose difficulties with accreditation issues. The national standards developed by CSWE (1995b) should be helpful to social work programs that decide to develop distance learning.

Other Educational Purposes

Anecdotal responses received in this survey suggest that a number of programs are considering distance learning for courses such as seminars for field work educators. This presumes that schools of social work are recognizing that distance learning is useful for courses other than those leading to traditional degrees and for the reduction of time associated with mandated training and supervision. Coupled with this is the result that 20 of the respondents now use this medium to carry continuing education to the field—an increase of 166% when compared to the authors' earlier study (Jennings, Siegel, & Conklin, 1994).

The use of distance learning in continuing education is encouraging since most other allied professions have been providing continuing education in this manner for more than a decade (Kuramoto, 1984). It would seem that this trend could open the door to the provision of social work courses and related educational activities for social workers in hospitals, medical centers, businesses, and other agency sites (Jennings, Siegel, & Conklin, 1994). Greater use of school-agency partnerships might develop as social service agencies communicate and contract with social work programs for additional in-service training and staff development. With regional, national, or international hook-ups, programs might also utilize the expertise of people outside of the immediate classroom environment.

Selection and Training of Teachers

Although knowledge of the appropriate technology is extremely important, the most crucial element of effective distance learning is the selection and training of teachers (Beaudoin, 1990). Programs that responded to our survey recognized that specialized and specific training is needed; almost two thirds of the faculty who taught via distance learning had received specialized education in distance learning delivery. "Live, hands-on" experience was the major method of training, according to 80% of the respondents. One third of the respondents indicated that faculty members were "appointed" as distance education teachers. However, it cannot be assumed that they were immediately ready to master television, compressed video, or any other live media without significant assistance to develop instructional materials, orientation to the equipment, and coaching from experienced instructors or media specialists.

The finding that many schools provide training for new distance education classroom instructors is encouraging, since additional preparation is necessary for teachers to become comfortable with such technology. Preparation and presentation of courses via distance learning is far different and more complex than courses prepared for traditional classroom delivery, even though the content may be the same. The instructor must be able to relate to students within the context of a high-tech environment.

Because distance learning is a visual medium, teachers will find themselves using more illustrations, graphics, and videotapes to amplify their "classroom," while working to ensure optimal interaction with students at various locations. Ironically, teachers are asked to be more fully prepared because unused air time can be deadly (imagine what happens if

a newscaster does not have script or graphics for even a few moments!). A range of opportunities opens up when developing presentations that strive to the quality of program production offered on television. The obvious result is that these presentations are organized differently, have a different tone than traditional lectures, and can be used to involve students in a variety of interactive activities at several sites. This can be extremely energizing for the classroom teacher who prepares and presents a course in this manner.

To assist the teacher, technical assistance at receiving sites was identified as crucial to ensure that reception (and transmission if the system is fully interactive) is not interrupted. There is little in the literature about what types of staff supports should be provided for social work educators using distance learning technology, nor is information available about what might entail standardized training for faculty. Ironically, elementary and secondary school teachers are required to have completed teaching methodology courses, but teachers in social work programs—or for that matter in most higher education programs—are not. In fact, most social work instructors do not have degrees in education. It is therefore important to provide training for technology teaching and delivery that goes well beyond our traditional practice. Few among us are gifted as engaging and enlightening lecturers; if this trend is extended to distance learning teachers, the results will show in poor course quality and poor student interest.

Although it is encouraging that more than half of the instructors in the survey received preparation time to improve their teaching methods, a number of related issues still need to be addressed. How do social work educators learn to teach in the distance learning classroom? What types of training are necessary for

faculty members to begin to adapt their curriculum materials to multiple sites? Who will teach them to move into more visual forms of presentation? Who will provide explanation to the students at the various sites about the similarities and differences from the traditional classroom? And how are faculty to be evaluated (especially for promotion and tenure)?

Implications

The survey findings suggest that social work education is continuing to embrace and expand the use of distance learning. Models of curriculum delivery are being explored for all levels of social work education. The technological revolution has been explosive, bringing with it myriad tools and techniques that enhance learning, and social work programs are incorporating them for BSW and MSW education and for field instruction.

While most programs are expanding their offerings within their own communities, the potential for collaboration and communication beyond the central campus is evident and intriguing. Teaching and learning can occur across geographic and time boundaries, and hence opportunities for equal access to education and information have never been greater. Perhaps the traditional definitions of faculty, student, and even university identification will change. What about a Cyberspace School of Social Work?

Traditional approaches to learning are being challenged as we access and process information in new ways. Social work education has a unique opportunity to redefine professional roles in a way that will continue to empower individuals. This demands the abandonment of traditional definitions of classroom, school, agency, clients, students, and teachers. Moreover, student learning remains a critical issue because it involves knowl-

edge and skill acquisition. It was not this study's intent to examine whether distance or traditional learning is more conducive for the acquisition of knowledge or of critical thinking skills. These issues were addressed by Jennings, Siegel, and Baskind (1991), who found no differences in student learning. However, the issue of student learning needs continuing research.

While resources vary from institution to institution, the profession itself can incorporate a collaborative model for the development and implementation of distance learning technology for the 21st century. Distance has little to do with the benefits of distance learning.

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