

**Working through Challenges and Solutions
Encountered in a Social Work Distance Education Program**

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Abstract

Now in its fifth year since inception, this social work distance education program has grown despite unforeseen challenges and limitations. This paper examines the solutions that have been implemented to overcome these challenges. Factors include recruitment, technology, student-faculty relationships, professional socialization, and field education.

Introduction

The social work profession in the United States emerged in the 20th century, largely in response to industrialization and urbanization (Hopps & Penderhughes, 1992). Although this profession is rooted on relations, direct service, and focusing on verbal and nonverbal communication, it is also true that social work practice and education have not been stagnant. Instead the social work profession has been evolving according to social needs, trends and times. Although often faced with some resistance, technology has entered the social work education arena as well. This article portrays the City of Laredo's experience after closing the only social work program available in 2010. It presents the needs, actions, approaches, challenges and solutions experienced in the development of a social work distance education program.

Overview and Needs

The City of Laredo is located at the South Border of Texas; north of the border of the Rio Grande River, or Rio Bravo, as it is known in Mexico. Laredo's land area consists of 88.91 square miles, with a population density of 2,655.5 persons per square mile, making Laredo the second most populated city on the Texas – Mexico border, preceded only by El Paso (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). There were 29.8% people in Laredo living below the poverty level between 2008 and 2012, compared to 17.4% statewide. During the same period, 17.4% persons who were twenty five years of age or older had an education of a bachelor's degree or higher, compared to 26.3% statewide. Approximately 95.6% of the population is of Mexican descent, and 91.9% speak a language other than English at home, presumably Spanish (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014).

Cities with similar aforementioned characteristics require social services, programs and experts to intervene and improve social conditions. However, in 2007, the only existing Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) program in the City of Laredo announced its pending closure, and the program ended in 2010. This closing limited access for students who wanted to pursue a career in social work; it also posed the problem of a shortage of social workers available to fill the needed social work positions and address social service needs. As a result, the closest available social work programs in the United States were the University of Texas Pan-American (UTPA) and Our Lady of the Lake University, both approximately 150 miles away.

Actions and approaches

A fundamental principle of the Problem Solving Model of Intervention is to transform challenges into solutions. Frequently, the solutions are not perfect; however, they often open

doors to test solutions that had not been considered. Faculty members of the social work program that was about to close its doors requested a meeting with Dr. Juan Maldonado, President at Laredo Community College (LCC), who extended support to the University of Texas Pan – American to host their social work programs using the LCC premises and services.

It is clear that technology provides opportunities for individuals who might not otherwise be able to obtain a college education. Research studies have found that distance is only one barrier for the contemporary “non-traditional” students who are working, have families, and live in rural areas. Distance education programs are also more attractive because they often offer the flexibility they need (Allen-Meares, P. & Quam, J.K., 1999; Crowell & McCarragher, 2007; Oliaro & Trotter, 2010; Pardasani, Goldkind, Heyman, & Cross-Denny, 2012; Reamer, 2013).

In 2009, an agreement between the University of Texas Pan – American and the Laredo Community College established the UTPA Social Work Distance Education Program. While looking for alternatives for the City of Laredo, it was brought to UTPA faculty members’ attention that students who started their social work career at the University of Texas at Brownsville (UTB) had to travel approximately 65 miles in order to complete the last two years of the bachelor in social work at UTPA, so the agreement was extended to those students as well. The first UTPA Distance Education Master of Science in Social Work (MSSW) cohort of seven students was admitted in fall 2009. The BSW counterpart started the following academic year, but this was only available for Laredo; eight students were enrolled.

The use of multiple tools was identified as essential for distance education (Menchaca and Bekele, 2008). They found that students and faculty both responded favorably to the distance education courses when multiple communication tools as well as a built in face-to-face component were utilized as this increased the likelihood and the quality of communication

between all participants in the course. Likewise, the approach selected for the UTPA, UTB & LCC distance education program was based on a combination of methods that includes face to face, teleconference, and online courses. One faculty member is stationed in the City of Laredo, while other instructors will travel occasionally to offer face to face courses or meet with students. The faculty member in Laredo also serves as a coordinator and advisor for that site.

Since faculty travel is not always feasible, adjunct instructors who live close to or at the respective sites have been employed. This has allowed students the opportunity to benefit from face-to-face instruction for all social work practice courses. Instructors are therefore available to provide immediate feedback and direction when students learn and practice specific social work skills. Another alternative has been to have full-time faculty from UTPA travel on alternate weeks, so that travel is minimized to half time each semester.

Challenges and Solutions

Recruitment:

Although the need for the social work program was evident, recruiting students for the BSW and MSSW distance education program was not an easy task. Overall, students were not necessarily aware of the formal collaboration agreements between their local institutions and the distance education program offered by UTPA. The slight physical presence of faculty members or advisors in any of the two distant sites made the program almost invisible.

Several efforts have been made to overcome this issue, including posting advertisements in the local newspaper and on campus bulletin boards, and maintaining contact with student advisors at their respective institutions. However, the most significant intervention was to assign a second year MSSW Macro Concentration student at each of the distance sites to complete their

field practicum. These students were responsible for developing and implementing a plan of recruitment, providing orientation and support for the application process, and coordinating orientation meetings for the students accepted into the programs. Interns visited community college classes, social service agencies and community fairs, and made use of mass media. They also provided orientations to second year students at the partner institutions. As a result, the number of students enrolled in our distance education program increased as follows:

ENROLLMENT IN DISTANCE EDUCATION PROGRAM		
BY YEAR AND PROGRAM		
Academic Year:	BSW	MSSW
2009 – 2010	0	7
2010 – 2011	8	15
2011 – 2012	9	0
2012 – 2013	9	6
2013 – 2014	19	18

Challenges with technology:

Teleconferencing can be challenging for both the students and the instructors. Technical difficulties are sometimes encountered, including poor connection, limited visibility, and problems with sound. In order to address these technical difficulties, proctors have been hired and assigned at the three different sites so that they can be available if there are problems with audio or video while teleconferencing. Optic Fiber connectivity has been recently installed to

enhance video to a High Definition quality; this feature improved the student-student and faculty-student interaction. Students meet in a conference room with a round table format that is enhanced with a wireless microphone for the professor, a mounted camera with zoom capacity that is controlled by the proctor(s), and a desktop microphone for students. The rooms are equipped with other devices such as a whiteboard, PC, overhead and vertical projectors, and internet access. These technologies and equipment facilitate active learning and support the delivery of the distance education.

Faculty members also supplement the teleconferenced courses with the use of Blackboard Learn, which allows the instructor to post any copies of assignments, power points, videos, lectures, etc., ahead of time so that students in the distance learning program can access them prior to or after class meetings.

In addition to the aforementioned equipment, students have access to library resources and writing centers during regular class times as well as evenings and weekends. UTPA has services available for the distance learning students; these include “Chat with the librarian,” “E-mail the librarian,” “Text the librarian,” interlibrary loans, distance access to data bases, and E-books. The Online Weekend Writing Service and Skype Tutoring are available to them as well.

Student-Faculty Relationships

Although distance learning offers the opportunity to students to access an education that they probably would not be able to obtain otherwise, it also carries some challenges and limitations, especially for an education in social work. Social work is a profession that requires the study of knowledge and practice skills for working with people at all levels, including

individuals, families, small groups, organizations, and communities. It is grounded on human relationships, leadership, and verbal and nonverbal communication skills. These skills and social interactions can be diminished by online education. As one student said,

“We (students) know what our professors look like and can recognize them; however, our professors will never recognize us unless we attend a face to face class with them. I miss that direct contact with professors and with classmates. Posting on a board or chat is not as enriching as having educational discussions in the classroom”.

Pelech et al. (2013) emphasized that these relationships can be enhanced through structured use of group discussion in the online courses, and further urged that expectations of faculty members be clear and that feedback to students be prompt and frequent.

Additionally, online courses run the risk of ethical violations (Reamer, 2013). Faculty members can create the parameters for the virtual classroom; however, there is no way to guarantee that students will not violate them. Reamer (2013) identified concerns related to privacy violations and respect for others views since the online course room can offer a “sense of freedom” for students who might otherwise be intimidated to express themselves in the regular classroom. Reamer suggested that faculty members be clear about expectations regarding privacy and respect in accordance with the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics.

While it is acceptable to teach theory via online courses, it is imperative that the practice skills are taught in the traditional classroom so that students have the benefit of critique and feedback from the instructor, especially when it has to do with expected professional behavior.

Distance learning poses a challenge for students because faculty who are teaching online or via teleconference may not be easily accessible. Since students are not on campus, they are not able to visit faculty members in their offices. This often poses a challenge for faculty members because travel is not always feasible. With the many demands that faculty members have, it can be difficult to travel 150 miles each way to the distance learning site on a weekly basis.

Fortunately, interaction with professors and other students improves when the courses are delivered via teleconference or live streaming. It is common to have students of all three sites enrolled in one teleconference delivered course; nevertheless, student's interactions and networking tend to be limited to the small cohort of students on each site.

Professional Socialization:

Students attending distance education programs usually have very minimal participation in student bodies, university governance, professional students' organizations or any other activity at the main institution. Several things have been implemented at the UTPA social work distance education program in an effort to decrease this lack of student interaction and participation. A face to face orientation for new students was implemented for the Laredo cohort. Several faculty members, staff and the Director of Field Education attended the meeting. A portion of a similar orientation which occurred at the main campus and included the Brownsville cohort was videotaped and played during the orientation at Laredo. The advisor for the Graduate Social Work Student Organization encouraged distance education students to join the organization and offered the opportunity to conduct the meetings via live streaming. Also, faculty members who wouldn't be able to attend the off-site orientation introduced themselves and addressed a few words directly to students. The BSW students were encouraged to affiliate

themselves with the Social Work Student's Association (SWSA) as well. Faculty members have increased efforts to encourage students' participation in their respective local chapters of the National Association of Social Workers in order to increase the sense of belonging to the social work community. These efforts concur with Crowell and McCarragher (2007), who emphasized the importance of student-to-student interaction and encouraged activities such as dinner or cookouts on a regular basis, allowing students to meet each other and build relationships outside of the virtual classroom setting.

Field Education

Students are placed for an internship to complete their hours in the areas where they live. The Director of Field Education meets face to face with students, field instructors, and the field liaison every semester to review the field placement process. The field liaisons for the off-site cohorts are usually the faculty members who are stationed in the respective sites. Efforts have also been made to increase the number of affiliation agreements with agencies and qualified field instructors who serve within the Webb and Cameron Counties – Laredo and Brownsville areas, respectively. This has provided the students with the opportunity to complete their field practice close to the area where they live or work.

Conclusion

There is consensus that distance education poses a number of challenges for students and faculty alike (Menchaca & Bekele, 2008; Pelech et al. (2013); Quinn, Fitch, & Youn, 2011; Reamer, 2013). Distance Education poses greater preparation and evaluation demands that justify a lower than average teacher-student ratio that is not always possible. Active learning is difficult, and some class activities are at times impossible to do.

There are still some unresolved challenges, and probably more to come. For example, having only one monitor in the classroom limits the student's ability to see their classmates at the distance site; this, in turn, can make some of the activities difficult to complete, especially with seminar style classes. Adding monitors would allow all participants to see their peers at the distance site regardless of where they are sitting. Nonetheless, there are more serious and difficult challenges: distance education may not be appropriate for every student; students with unique learning needs and styles may find distance and online education difficult (Reamer, 2013). Online courses require self-discipline, and this may not be an ability that all students possess. Additionally, online courses can pose another set of ethical concerns, including integrity in course taking and evaluation (Reamer, 2013).

Currently, a challenge for the UTPA distance education program is the need for program evaluation. While it is important to improve the services, it is also important to evaluate the quality of distance education. Technology is here to stay, and continues to develop at a very fast pace. New generations in the United States are becoming more technologically savvy, so it is imperative that social work education incorporate creative ways to address current trends and challenges by doing what they do best – problem solve.

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