

**The Need for Social Workers along the
South Texas-Mexico Border: Meeting the Need through Distance Education**

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Abstract

As we approach the end of the second decade of the new millennium, the United States continues to see significant growth of the Hispanic population. It is expected that one in every six people will be Hispanic by the close of the second decade, and that by 2060, the population will increase to approximately 128.8 million, or 31% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Along the South Texas-Mexico border, the Hispanic population ranges from approximately 80-95%, and many of these areas are poverty stricken and greatly underserved. Consequently, social workers are in great demand to help meet the multiple and diverse needs of those living in these areas. As a result of the collaboration between a Texas university and a community college, students have been able to obtain a social work degree via distance education.

Introduction

As we approach the end of the second decade of the new millennium, the United States continues to see significant growth of the Hispanic population. It is expected that one in every six people will be Hispanic by the close of the second decade, and that by 2060, the population will increase to approximately 128.8 million or 31% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2012). Consequently,

Hispanics will play an increasingly important role in U.S. society and all aspects related to it, such as the economy, education, health, mental health and the future as a whole.

While there is a limited amount of literature focusing on the reasons that Hispanic students do not pursue graduate studies in social work, there is extensive literature about the growing Hispanic population, as well as specific needs as they relate to social services. This article will focus on the benefits of a distance learning Master of Social Work program in the South Texas border region and its positive impact on the primary areas where graduate level social workers are needed, which include: counseling/therapy, faculty mentors, administrators, supervision, peer support and advocacy.

Background and Significance

All bachelor's and master's programs in social work must meet accreditation standards stipulated by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), which is recognized as the sole accrediting agency for all social work education programs in the United States (CSWE, n.d.). Currently, there is a growing trend of social work programs that offer all or portions of their curricula via distance education and/or online only. In today's society, students often find themselves in multiple roles, including working parent, caregiver to a parent, student, spouse, etc. Distance education and online programs have provided a viable option for these individuals who might otherwise not be able to pursue a graduate degree. Many students have sought options that allow them to complete a graduate degree without having to relocate and/or even go to campus. Vernon, Pittman-Munke, Vakalahi, Adkins and Pierce (2009) noted that there has been an increase in the number of programs offering these options as a way to meet these students' needs. While some studies have shown that students have a preference for a traditional

face-to-face course room (Thyer, Artelt, Markward, & Doziere, 1998), others have reported that there is not a significant difference in the level of satisfaction when compared to students who are enrolled in distance learning courses via interactive television or fully online courses (Crowell & McCarragher, 2007; Oliaro & Trotter, 2010; Petracchi, Mallinger, Engel, Rishel, & Washburn, 2005).

In 2009, the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley (UTRGV) (formerly known as University of Texas-Pan American - UTPA) established a partnership with Laredo Community College (LCC) in order to offer a hybrid distance education program which effectively delivers a bachelor's and a master's in social work. This partnership addressed a significant barrier to social work education in the area. Since its inception, a total of 26 students have been awarded a Bachelor of Social Work degree and 29 have been awarded a Master of Social Work degree. This has allowed an additional 55 individuals to provide social work services in the Laredo, Texas area.

Literature Review

Educational Attainment for Hispanic Students

Historically, Hispanics have lagged behind in educational attainment when compared to their White counterparts. High school dropout rates have decreased between 1990 and 2014 (for Hispanic students (from 32.4 to 10.6%); however, they are still higher than rates for both White (9.0 to 5.2%) and African-American (13.2 to 7.4%) students (National Center for Education, 2016). With regards to higher education, these gaps have been even greater. Specifically, for students in graduate social work programs, the percentage of those who are of Hispanic descent has been very small (approximately 2.5% for those who self-identified as "Chicano/Mexican American and 7.5% for those who self-identified as "Other Latino/Hispanic") (CSWE, 2010).

To date, the large majority of social work students enrolled in programs accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) have been White (Non-Hispanic); in fact, the most recent survey revealed that those who identified themselves in this category totaled 54.6% (CSWE, 2010). Given that Texas is a state with a large Hispanic population (37.6%) (U. S. Census Bureau, 2010a), the number of social workers of Hispanic descent should be somewhat relative to the population. As the Hispanic population continues to grow rapidly in the United States, it is likely that the gap between the needs of society and the graduate social workers who can address these needs will increase significantly. The current literature offers limited information regarding the reasons that Hispanic students do not pursue a graduate education in social work.

According to the literature, there are a number of factors that influence a Hispanic student's decision to attend graduate school; these include family, cultural beliefs, language barriers, accessibility to minority faculty and self-perceptions about abilities (Abreu, 2000; Caravantes, 2006; Harvey, Beckman, Browner, & Sherman, 2002; Lopez, Lopez, & Fong, 1991; Raffaelli & Ontai, 2004; Schwarzbaum, 2004; Wilton & Constantine, 2003). Family support often includes financial as well as emotional support. Additionally, parents of students were more likely to provide financial support if the students are single or if they had children (Descartes, 2006).

The literature revealed that in some instances, males felt threatened when females were the primary breadwinners in the home (Caravantes, 2006; Harvey et al., 2002; Raffaelli & Ontai, 2004). This was particularly true for adult children with their own children as well as single, adult children (with no children of their own) who were attending college or graduate school

(Descartes, 2006). Additionally, the literature also suggested that Hispanic females are generally expected to stay at home and care for elderly parents and/or for younger siblings (Castillo & Hill, 2004).

Quezada and Loque (2004) noted that students' perceptions about the university's interests in program diversity were largely determined by the number of minority faculty present. They also recognized that trust levels were likely to be greater if universities employed faculty of color. Knowles (1990) identified three factors that were necessary to enhance the learning atmosphere. These included:

- 1) Helping students to feel respected and valued.
- 2) Having students know that they will be in a reciprocal relationship where ideas will be shared.
- 3) Having a supportive environment that is open and authentic.

For students living on the U. S.-Mexico border, it is critical that they experience the diversity the program has to offer. A faculty member of Hispanic descent is assigned and serves as the primary contact in the Laredo area. This allows for immediate contact with students seeking to discuss concerns with a faculty member. The faculty member also serves as a liaison to the program and its faculty that is approximately 160 miles away. This structure ensures that the critical factors identified by Knowles are met.

The Need for Social Workers

In an era when society is continually faced with many challenges, it is not unusual for the average individual to experience stress. Problems related to family, friends, employment, school, and finances are only a few issues that generally affect many people. When one adds the effects of more specific crises such as domestic violence, substance abuse, poverty, or child

maltreatment, the problems can be overwhelming. Emotional and professional support is often needed in order to handle the distress which results from these issues.

Social workers who have specialized in mental health are trained to provide the many services needed by these individuals who experience difficulties which range from low levels of stress to more severe mental illnesses. Compounding these findings is the issue of poverty. According to Hudson (2005), people who were impoverished were three times more likely to suffer from a mental illness. In South Texas, counties that are on the physical border with Mexico reported a poverty level which averaged 30 -35.8% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010b). According to Hudson (2005), poverty and its related factors, such as unemployment and homelessness, were strongly correlated to higher risk of mental illness.

For Hispanics, concerns regarding mental health issues and stressors are no different; however, there are a number of reasons why these needs may not be addressed. Even though graduate level social workers are trained and qualified to provide mental health services, graduate level social workers, especially those that are of Hispanic descent, are scarce. Because of the enormity of the stressors described above, it is imperative that more Hispanic graduate social workers be educated and trained to provide these services. Further, the number of people of Mexican origin accounted for 63% of the Hispanic population 2010 census (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010c), which implies that there is a significant population to be served by social workers of similar backgrounds. Although much of this population is concentrated in large cities such as Los Angeles, Houston, and San Antonio, border cities in Texas such as Laredo, McAllen, and Brownsville are 95.6%, 84.6% and 93.2% (U. S. Census Bureau, 2010 b) Hispanic, respectively. Additionally, it is important to note that levels of poverty are particularly high in

these areas (30 – 35.8%) (U. S. Census Bureau, 2010c); as already noted, mental health concerns tend to be higher in areas of poverty.

Suleiman (2003) noted that “social services have been generally unresponsive to the values and needs of Hispanic families, even to the most basic of communication in Spanish” (p. 186). Given that Hispanics have often demonstrated a need for social services, it is important that more students seek a graduate education in social work in order to more effectively meet these needs. The Hogg Foundation (2007) noted that “people of color are underrepresented in mental health professions, and Texas appears to be lacking in effective racial and culturally diverse recruitment in the mental health professions” (p. 1). Furthermore, Hogg averred that although social workers are the “largest group of mental health providers” in Texas and across the entire United States, the areas of West and South Texas are still severely lacking these services.

The number of people diagnosed with a serious mental illness in the state of Texas is significant – approximately 3.8% for adults, and approximately 11.3% of adolescents were diagnosed with at least one major depressive episode (SAMHSA, 2015). Because the Hispanic population has continued to grow, it can be assumed that many of those who are affected by these illnesses are people of Hispanic descent. Adding to this assumption is the fact that many Hispanics living in the South Texas border are currently living at or below the poverty level (U.S. Census Bureau, 2010c), and poverty has been identified as a risk factor for mental illness. Studies have shown that clients prefer working with social workers of the same ethnic background (Abreu, 2000; Lopez et al., 1991; Schwarzbaum, 2004; Wilton & Constantine, 2003); consequently, with the shortage of Hispanic graduate level social workers, many people do not receive the mental health services they need.

The University of Texas Rio Grande Valley's Social Work Program has served to fill the need for social workers, especially those of Hispanic descent, in McAllen, Brownsville and other cities in the Rio Grande Valley, but the gap remained in Laredo, with the closing of the local program which existed from 2000-2010 (Cortez, 2007). This paper focuses on Laredo and the efforts to increase the number of social workers there.

Finding Solutions

When the Laredo-based university, Texas A&M International University, announced the impending closure (projected date was May 2010) of its Bachelor of Social Work program (Cortez, 2007), one of the authors (together with several community members) sought assistance from legislators, as well as the Laredo Community College (LCC) President. Recognizing the need for social workers, because there were fewer than a dozen master's level social workers in Laredo at the time, LCC administrators collaborated with administrators from UTRGV (formerly UTPA) to establish a hybrid distance education program in social work. In addition to providing a Bachelor of Social Work program, it also established a Master of Science in Social Work. The goals of the program were twofold: 1) to address the social service and mental health needs of Laredo; and 2) to make social work education accessible to students who were unable to relocate.

According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics (2015), it is expected that the need for social workers will continue to grow faster (an average of 12% between 2014 and 2024) than any other profession through the year 2018. Specifically, it is expected that there will be a 12% growth in the area of child, family and school social work, approximately 20% growth for mental health and substance abuse social workers, and about 22% growth for medical and public health social

workers. Because of the expertise required in these areas, it is essential that providers attain the education necessary to provide these services.

If one poses the following questions: “Do counselors need to be of the same ethnicity as their clients in order to be effective?” “Are mentees better able to relate to their mentors if their mentors have the same ethnic or cultural background?” “Do students respond more readily to instructors who are ethnically the same?”, the quick response to these questions is “No.”

However, when one delves more deeply and examines the needs of individuals, one finds that Hispanic clients often do have a preference for Hispanic workers (Abreu, 2000; Engstrom, Gamble, & Min, 2009; Lopez et al., 1991; Schwarzbaum, 2004; Wilton & Constantine, 2003). In the same manner, mentees and students also prefer a mentor or instructor who is ethnically or culturally similar because they serve as role models (Quezada & Louque, 2004; Verdugo, 1995); therefore, the need for Hispanic social workers needed to be addressed.

Addressing the Need

With the establishment of the BSW and MSSW programs, one faculty member was hired to be stationed in Laredo full-time. This allowed for ongoing networking, awareness and recruitment of students, as well as collaboration with college administrators, faculty and staff, and community members involved in social service agencies.

The delivery of courses for the BSW and MSSW program would consist of a mix of online courses and courses taught through Interactive Television. Blackboard was also used to supplement the Interactive courses and to deliver the online course. With regard to online, courses were designed with the instructional designers using Quality Matters standards. Blackboard also assisted with email, notes for students, information on assignments and a place to upload assignments. Additionally, Blackboard assisted students with Discussion Boards and

any group assignments. Interactive Television used PowerPoint for presentations for students.

Faculty also used the document camera to share notes for both classes to view, face-to-face and interactive.

The first MSSW cohort consisted of five students, all of whom graduated in December 2010. At the time of this writing, twenty-nine students had graduated with an MSSW degree, and eleven more will be graduating this Spring. The first BSW cohort was admitted in 2011, and, to date, a total of twenty-six students have graduated.

In addition to recruiting and graduating students, there was a need to establish field practicum sites. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) (2015) requires that BSW students complete a minimum of 400 practice hours in a field setting; these students must receive weekly field instruction from an individual who holds a BSW and five years of post-graduate experience or an MSW/MSSW and two years of post-graduate experience. The MSSW degree requires that students complete a total of 900 practicum hours; they must receive field instruction from someone who has an MSW/MSSW and at least two years post-graduate experience. Given that there were few Master's level social workers in Laredo prior to the existence of the program, it was a challenge to establish these sites. As students have graduated, the number of field instructors, as well as the number of field sites, has increased. To date, the university has an affiliation with twenty-five social service agencies where students can complete the required practicum and gain practice experience.

Implications and Recommendations

Clearly, there is a high need for social workers in the Laredo area, and the social work program provided by the University of Texas Rio Grande Valley is helping to fill that gap. In 2014, it was reaccredited for eight more years by the Council on Social Work Education, and this now included the distance education component. For Laredo, the continuation of a distance education program is essential to its ongoing success as it allows non-traditional students the opportunity to complete a graduate degree without having to relocate. This program has met the two goals initially identified.

As suggested in the literature, it is important for universities to ensure that students have access to support services such as counseling and stress management. Even though studies vary regarding the mental health needs of Hispanic students, some studies do indicate that Hispanic students can be more prone to depression and/or anxiety, especially if family support is more of a risk factor than a protective one (Del Pilar, 2009). Castillo et al. (2008) noted that these feelings of depression and/or anxiety also depended on several factors, including the quality of social support and socioeconomic status. If students are able to obtain counseling and stress management through a university counseling center, or in this case, at the community college which this program is associated, then this can fill some of the needs that Hispanic students may encounter. Additionally, having a faculty mentor available in the same city is critical so that students can have that connection with the university.

The literature also revealed that universities should focus on increasing cultural competence among faculty members, as well as emphasizing this as part of the curriculum. While this includes focusing efforts on recruiting faculty of color, it should be clear that all faculty members should engage in training that emphasizes cultural sensitivity. Torres (2003) referred to “ethnic identity development as a tool” which can help administrators, recruiters,

student affairs personnel, and faculty members have a better understanding how cultural and ethnic factors can impact students of color (p.545).

Conclusion

As we near the end of the second decade, the distance education social work program continues to grow and meet the needs of students as well as the community. It has successfully reached the two goals identified, and it is expected that it will continue to do so.

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