

**Best Practices in Professional Distance Education:  
A Hybrid Social Work Distance Education Program in South Texas**

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**Abstract**

The operation of distance education programs can be quite challenging especially when offering professional programs that require internships, practica and teaching courses that focus on skill development. It is difficult for instance to teach counseling and other skills through the internet. Nevertheless, the department of social work at The University of Texas – Pan American has developed a hybrid distance education program that enables it to effectively deliver a bachelor's and a master's in social work in the two remote locations of Laredo and Brownsville, Texas with the assistance of modern educational technology. This program provides access to accredited social work programs in a geographic area covering approximately 300 miles in the state of Texas. The programs are delivered through a combination of Blackboard, teleconference, Wimba, Skype, cellular phones, reduced seating courses, and Face to Face courses taught on at remote sites by adjuncts or full time faculty members. UTPA is uniquely positioned to respond to this educational need given that we currently represent the only viable CSWE accredited social work department offering both bachelor's and master's degrees in social work south of Austin and Houston, Texas.

## **Introduction**

The operation of distance education programs can be quite challenging especially when offering professional programs that require internships, practica and teaching courses that focus on skill development. It is difficult, for instance, to teach counseling and other skills through the internet. Nevertheless, the department of social work at The University of Texas – Pan American (UTPA) has developed a hybrid distance education program that enables it to effectively deliver a bachelor's and a master's in social work in the two remote locations of Laredo and Brownsville, Texas with the assistance of modern educational technology. This program provides access to accredited social work programs in a geographic area covering approximately 300 miles in the state of Texas. Without our distance education program, prospective students would need to travel up to six hours one way to earn their social work degree. Our distance education program offers its students at these two remote locations the opportunity to earn their degree without having to leave their home town to take any course. The programs are delivered through a combination of Blackboard, teleconference, Wimba, Skype, cellular phones, reduced seating courses, and face-to-face courses taught at remote sites by adjuncts or full time faculty members. UTPA is uniquely positioned to respond to this educational need given that we currently represent the only viable CSWE accredited social work department offering both bachelor's and master's degrees in social work south of Austin and Houston, Texas. The only other accredited social work program near the Texas/Mexico border is in the city of El Paso located close to 800 miles away from UTPA. The innovative aspect of our program is why we have combined different technologies and approaches into a hybrid program

to significantly increase access to graduate and undergraduate social work programs in a very vast geographic area.

### **Literature Review**

The delivery of social work education through distance education programs represents a relatively new trend within our profession. While recognizing that their list is not exhaustive, as of March 2012, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) has identified four universities that utilize distance education to deliver their BSW programs and 20 universities that utilize distance education to help deliver their MSW/MSSW programs (CSWE, 2011). Given the recent and novel nature of these programs, the Council on Social Work Education has not yet developed accreditation standards or performance criteria for them. The expectation of quality in distance education seems implicit given that all accredited programs, with or without distance education, are expected to comply with all accreditation standards.

Social work educators have for some time now struggled with the need to maintain the integrity of social work education while at the same time trying to increase access to our programs by non-traditional students including those who are adult, employed and those who have been out of school for several years. To date, a few social work programs or schools in the United States have chosen to pioneer in the area of graduate or undergraduate distance professional education. These include Florida State University, Cleveland State University, The University of Akron, and Texas State University. While traditional students continue to attend classes on campus during regular business hours, many students have looked for opportunities to enroll in programs that offer more flexibility with regard to the time and place the courses are offered. Students who live in rural areas, have daytime jobs and/or do not have access to social

work programs locally have largely benefitted from distance education. According to Vernon, Pittman-Munke, Vakalahi, Adkins and Pierce (2009), there has been a steady increase in the number of social work programs that are offering social work degrees partially or fully through distance education. One of the main challenges associated with delivering social work education through distance programming has been finding effective ways to help students develop practice skills through teleconferencing or internet. It seems like some of the most challenging skills to teach long distance include: assessment, interviewing, intervention planning and counseling.

As with most innovative ideas, social work distance education has evolved, and researchers have seen a change in the outcomes reported by students. For example, in 1995, the University of Georgia taught graduate courses that were simultaneously transmitted to two different locations; one course section was taught live at one location and taught via interactive television at the second location. The professor taught face to face at each location on alternating weeks (Thyer & Polk, 1997). Students at both sites received almost equal amounts of times via both formats. At the end of the course, the students identified live instruction as the preferred method of learning. In another study, MSW students who were also exposed to approximately equal amounts of live instruction and interactive television reported that they preferred live instruction (Thyer, Artelt, Markward, & Dozier, 1998).

In 2005, a Midwestern University found that “traditional courses still seem to encompass the most favorable positive classroom climate characteristics, especially among older students” (Mason, Helton, & Dziegielewski, 2010, p. 246). In contrast, other studies have reported that levels of satisfaction are not significantly different between students in traditional, face-to-face classrooms and students learning via interactive television or fully online courses (Crowell &

McCarragher, 2007; Oliaro & Trotter, 2010; Ouellette, Westhuis, Marshall, & Chang, 2006; Petracchi, Mallinger, Engel, Rishel, & Washburn, 2005)

The reported challenges associated with distance education include: how to effectively teach practice skills, reading fatigue, lack of training for faculty members on how to effectively teach long distance, and maintaining high quality human interactions that are at the heart of social work practice. Reportedly, it has been difficult to have students participate in role plays when teaching online. This has been a concern given that this activity has often been used by social work educators to help students develop practice skills. To overcome this obstacle, educators at Florida State University relied on videos in which therapists demonstrated the desired skills and then posted them on the class website so that students could watch them (Siebert & Spaulding-Givens, 2006).

Ouellete et al. (2006) reported the findings of a study conducted to compare the effectiveness of online education to that of face to face education. Students were placed in two sections of the same course; one section was taught in the traditional face-to-face format while the other section was taught completely online. Both sections utilized the same syllabus, text, and course objectives. In the online course, students videotaped their simulated role plays so that they could be viewed and critiqued by their peers as well as their instructors. The study found that “the acquisition of beginning interviewing skills of students taught in an online class and those taught in a traditional face-to-face classroom were approximately equal at the completion of the course” (p. 69).

Teleconferencing (aka IVT) has occasionally been used to teach courses requiring skill training. According to Smith & Wingerson (2006), this mode of delivery posed the risk of “possible dehumanization and disengagement that often results from screen viewing” (p.32).

Fredolino and Sutherland (2000) believed these effects tend to be minimized when programs were able to provide in-class faculty or technical staff support. Other ways to increase the quantity and quality of off-campus student-to-student interactions included requiring students to attend distance education orientation meetings and assigning group projects (Crowell & McCarragher, 2007).

Online courses usually require a substantial amount of reading, which may result in reading fatigue. In any given week, students may be required to read from the class textbook, class notes from the professor, additional reading materials assigned, and class discussion postings from other students. Siebert and Spaulding-Givens (2006) suggested that alternative types of media such as audio lectures and videos should be used in an effort to avoid reading fatigue. Additionally, they suggested that students should be assigned to groups for class discussions so they do not need to read all postings, and instead they only focus on those pertaining to their respective groups. Students taking fully online courses have reported to one of the authors of this article that the large amounts of readings without face-to-face interaction with the professor makes the online course feel like an independent study course.

The lack of formal training for faculty members on how to teach online has resulted in technical problems and frustration for both faculty and students. Crowell and McCarragher (2007) proposed that training should be available on an ongoing basis for any faculty member expected to teach online so they know how to use microphones, television monitors, and other media. The need for training faculty members teaching online and/or other type of distance education courses goes beyond the need to learn how to use technology. One of the authors of this article was admitted to the Online Exemplary Course Program made available to faculty

members at The University of Texas – Pan American after he had been teaching online for about three years. He learned that a graduate online policy course he had taught several times, which he considered to be very good, was hardly adequate after the course was subjected to the eight quality standards and the 41 sub-standards included in the “Quality Matters” curriculum used by many universities nationwide. This was a very humbling and great learning experience. In the opinion of this professor who also happens to be a department chair, no faculty member should be required to teach online for the first time without receiving this training or one that is equally rigorous.

Many faculty members report not being interested in online teaching or training for online teaching because they simply see those activities as more work with little or no additional rewards. For this reason, Haga and Heitkamp (2000) suggested that faculty members should be rewarded with appropriate incentives. Such rewards may include money or a decrease in workload to compensate for the extra time required to create distance education courses.

As proposed by Smith and Wingerson (2006), relationships are integral to effective social work practice (p. 31). This principle should always be kept in mind when developing fully online or teleconferenced courses. Smith and Wingerson (2006) suggested that it would be helpful for faculty members to meet with distance learning students at least once per semester in order to develop a more meaningful professor-student relationship. Haga and Heitkamp (2000) proposed that one or two class sessions should be face-to-face, and that technical support staff should be available at the remote sites.

While there is no set formula or definite best practice for delivering quality social work distance education, there is clearly an increasing need for distance education to respond to modern students’ educational needs (Ayala, 2009; Banks & Faul, 2007; Oliaro & Trotter, 2010;

Vernon et al., 2009). Ayala (2009) has suggested that a “blended” learning environment which encompasses traditional face-to-face and online learning is a favorable format because the combination may be a better way of meeting students’ varied learning needs. According to Ayala, “blended learning aims to reach beyond the potential of each individual approach (face-to-face/online) to create a new ‘whole’ and transform both the structure and method to teaching and learning” (p. 279). Regan and Youm (2008) concurred with Ayala and agreed that a blended or hybrid format could be the best course delivery method.

Another recommendation for enhancing distance education programs is the use of a wiki, which is a “website that allows visitors to make changes, contributions, or corrections” (“Wiki”, n.d.). Jones (2010) utilized wiki technology so that students could collaborate and work together on their material. Finally, Siebert and Spaulding-Givens (2006) suggested that courses should be taught face-to-face a few times before they are taught online so that instructors can feel comfortable with the course material. They also suggested that faculty members should be creative and open to constructive feedback from students so that courses and learning environments can be enhanced.

Given the current situation of the national and many state economies, public universities in particular are being expected to deliver quality graduate and undergraduate education in a more cost-effective and cost-efficient manner. The expectation often is that we service more students and increase the number of generated semester credit hours with the same or smaller number of social work faculty members. We propose that well managed distance education programs may prove to be an effective way for institutions of higher education to accomplish those goals.



### Challenges Faced by Social Work Educators in South Texas

Social work educators in South Texas currently face multiple challenges as they try to deliver high quality university education to educationally underserved and historically oppressed populations. We define South Texas as the geographic area south of San Antonio and Houston. The educational challenges in South Texas include: insufficient accredited social work programs, a disproportionately large Hispanic population, high poverty rates, low educational attainment, and an anti-immigrant and anti-Mexican political climate.

#### Insufficient Accredited Social Work Programs

As illustrated in Table 1, without our distance education program, potential social work students wishing to earn a bachelor's or master's degree would need to travel from 4 to 12 hours per day in order to attend an accredited social work program. The University of Texas – Pan American in turn delivers the BSW and MSSW programs to students in Laredo and Brownsville in their respective cities without students needing to travel anywhere.

Table 1. Social Work Programs Closest to Laredo and Brownsville

Universities	Degrees	One Way Distance
The University of Texas at San Antonio	MSW	157 miles from Laredo 280 miles from Brownsville
Texas A&M Kingsville	BSW	125 miles from Laredo 122 miles from Brownsville
The University of Texas at Austin	BSW, MSW, PhD	240 miles from Laredo 332 miles from Brownsville
University of Houston	MSW, PhD	355 miles from Laredo 357 miles from Brownsville
Texas State University in San Marcos	BSW, MSW	236 miles from Laredo 302 miles from Brownsville

#### Poverty and Low Educational Levels

As shown in the Table 2, the target population of The University of Texas – Pan American Department of Social Work is predominantly Hispanic and particularly of Mexican descent. This population is also disproportionately poor and undereducated.

Table 2. Overview of U. S./Mexico Border Counties

<b>US/MX Border County</b>	<b>Major Corresponding Cities</b>	<b>Percentage of Hispanic population</b>	<b>Percentage living in poverty</b>	<b>Percentage of high school graduates</b>
Cameron	Brownsville	88.1	34.0	62.4
Hidalgo	McAllen/Edinburg	90.6	35.2	59.5
Starr	Rio Grande	95.7	38.5	46.5
Zapata	Zapata	93.3	29.3	55.4
Webb	Laredo	95.7	30.9	61.7

U.S. Census Bureau. (2009)

Furthermore, a university report on entering students revealed that 70.6% of them were first generation college students as neither their mother nor father had earned a bachelor's degree from a college or university (OIRE, 2008).

#### Anti-immigrant Political Climate

UTPA faces a formidable challenge in trying to reach and provide a higher education to a population that to a large extent is composed of immigrants. We must keep in mind that according to The Universal Declaration of Human Rights of the United Nations even undocumented immigrant youngsters have a right to education (United Nations, n.d.).

In spite of the fact that the United States subscribes to this Universal Declaration of Human Rights, during the last year or so, multiple anti-immigrant bills have been introduced in the Texas Legislature. The bills that have been introduced in the House of Representatives include: HB 12, HB 18, HB 875, and HB 623. If approved, these bills would require local police to act as immigration agents, establish English as an official state language, and raise tuition costs to undocumented state residents, who also happen to be tax payers. Finally, we wish to highlight that in 2010, the Texas Department of Education attempted to rewrite Texas history by eliminating from the curricula of public schools textbooks that describe the contributions to our nation of Mexicans and Mexican-Americans (McKinley, 2010).

### **Origins of the UTPA Social Work Distance Education Program**

On August 8, 2007, the Laredo Morning Times reported that Texas A&M International University in Laredo would close its BSW program in May 2010 (Cortez, 2007). This announcement sent shockwaves through the state's social work community who were in disbelief about this decision. Shortly after that, state legislators from the Laredo area contacted the president of the University of Texas – Pan American to inquire about the possibility of delivering our accredited social work programs in that city. Reportedly, at the time of this announcement, this city with a population of more than 200,000 residents had fewer than a dozen master's level social workers. At the same time, the Department of Social Work at The University of Texas – Pan American received multiple requests for social work offerings in Brownsville from practitioners in that border city. All of these events motivated the admission of several creation of our distance education program in the fall 2009 semester.

### **Nature of Distance Education Program**

Laredo students may complete the first two years of university studies at the Laredo Community College (LCC) and complete their junior and senior years taking courses from The University of Texas – Pan American, which are delivered at the Community College. LCC has given UTPA access to their equipment and infrastructure including an office for a UTPA faculty member. UTPA also utilizes the LCC equipment and infrastructure to teach master's level courses.

Brownsville students may also complete the first two years of their bachelor's degree at The University of Texas at Brownsville (UTB) and their last two years at UTPA. The existing inter-institutional collaboration agreement also gives UTPA access to classrooms and technology at UTB. UTPA also utilizes the UTB equipment and infrastructure to teach master's level courses.

The BSW as well as the MSSW are delivered as part time evening programs in both Laredo and Brownsville, Texas. Both programs are offered through a combination of face to face, Blackboard and teleconference courses. Only 27 out of 63 credits or **43%** of the master's program are delivered through distance education methods. Any university in Texas delivering 50% or more of any academic program through distance education methods would need to be evaluated and authorized to do so by the state's regional accreditation entity, the Southern Association of Colleges and Secondary Schools (SACS). Table 3 is a breakdown of our course delivery methods for the master's program.

Table 3. Breakdown of MSSW Courses and Their Respective Delivery Methods

<b>MSSW Course Delivery Methods</b>	<b>Credits</b>	<b>%</b>
Internships in local human service organizations	<b>12</b>	<b>19</b>
UTPA faculty members or adjuncts teaching in Laredo and Brownsville	<b>24</b>	<b>38</b>

Blackboard or teleconference	27	43
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>63</b>	<b>100</b>

A minimum of 120 semester credit hours are required in order to earn a bachelor's degree in social work from UTPA. Thanks to partnerships created with The University of Texas at Brownsville and the Laredo Community College, students wishing to earn a bachelor's degree in social work are able to earn as many as 66 credits at those two partner institutions before being admitted to UTPA to complete their last two years of study. Table 4 illustrates how we deliver the 54 credits they need.

Table 4. Breakdown of BSW Courses and Their Respective Delivery Methods

<b>BSW Course Delivery Methods</b>	<b>Credits</b>	<b>%</b>
Internships in local human service organizations	6	5
UTPA faculty members or adjuncts teaching in Laredo and Brownsville	12	10
Blackboard or teleconference	36	30
<b>TOTALS</b>	<b>54</b>	<b>45</b>

### **Examples, Evidence or Indicators of Project Success**

Reportedly, in this city of approximately 250,000 residents, there were fewer than 10 MSWs in Laredo in August 2009 when our distance education program started. Three semesters later, we were able to graduate our first group of master's students, which almost doubled the number of social workers in Laredo with graduate degrees in the city.

Another success is that the university has also experienced a significant increase in the production of semester credit hours and revenues as a result of having this distance education

program. Table 5 illustrates how an increase in the production of semester credit hours in the department has been associated with the distance education program. The table below compares the number of semester credit hours generated by the BSW and MSSW programs during the 2008 fall semester and the 2009 spring semester when we had no distance education program, to the number of semester credit hours generated by each program during the most recent semesters.

Table 5. Impact of Distance Education Program on the Generation of Semester Credit Hours

Fall Semester Credit Hours Generated by the Distance Education Program			
	Fall Semester 2008	Fall Semester 2011	Increase
Graduate SCHs	555	915	360 or 39.4%
Undergraduate SCHs	1572	1683	105 or 6.3%

  

Spring Semester Credit Hours Generated by the Distance Education Program			
	Spring Semester 2010	Spring Semester 2011	Increase
Graduate SCHs	558	834	276 or 33%
Undergraduate SCHs	1431	1683	252 or 15%

### Cost Effectiveness

During the first three semesters of program operation the university invested a total of \$36,800 and produced \$182,189 for total net revenues of \$145,389. Table 6 is the financial report for the program's first three semesters of operation.

Table 6. Expenses and Revenues for the First Three Semesters of Operation

Expenses and Revenues	Amounts
<b>Total Revenues</b>	<b>\$182,189.80</b>
Tuition and Fees	\$103,467.80
Formula Funding	\$ 78,721.56
<b>Total Expenses</b>	<b>\$ 36,800.00</b>
<b>Net Income</b>	<b>\$145,389.80</b>

Access, Retention and Graduation since the Program's Inception in August 2009

Table 7. Breakdown of Student Admissions and Retention

Criteria	Number of Students
Applied	73
Admitted	57
Registered	47
Graduated	5
Active	38
Left the program	2
	(one due to problems with academic performance and one moved to New York)
Temporarily out of program due to illness	2
<b>Retention rate</b>	<b>95% or 45 out of 47.</b>

Table 7 shows a breakdown of the students who have applied and been admitted to the program since its inception. The very high retention rate for students who actually register in the

program has been explained by its students. The high level of accessibility has been identified as the main reason why students apply to these programs and remain in them until graduation. This distance education program is perceived as the only viable way to earn a social work degree by students who are full time working adults and heads of households.

### **Hispanic Focus**

The University of Texas - Pan American (UTPA) has been classified as a Hispanic Serving Institution by the Hispanic Association of Colleges and Universities given its **90%** Hispanic student body. Furthermore, UTPA primarily serves the Rio Grande Valley of Texas and the southeast Texas/Mexico border region including Cameron, Hidalgo, Starr, Webb and Zapata counties. According to the U.S. Census (2009), the percentage of Hispanic residents in these counties is shown in Table 8.

Table 8. The Percentages of Hispanic Residents in South Texas Border Counties

<b>Cameron</b>	<b>Hidalgo</b>	<b>Starr</b>	<b>Webb</b>	<b>Zapata</b>
87.4%	91.7%	97.9%	95.3%	90.2%

All academic programs at The University of Texas – Pan American have a Hispanic focus given the location of the university and the demographics of the population it serves. Furthermore, our social work programs offer two concentrations: 1. Direct services to Latino individuals, families and small groups, and 2. Administration and community practice. Both the bachelor's and the master's programs aim at preparing social work professionals to become



effective practitioners in the multicultural and binational environment of the Mexico/Texas border region.

### **Conclusion**

This hybrid distance education program is considered a best practice because it shows how a Hispanic Serving Institution has taken advantage of available educational technology, inter-institutional collaboration, and knowledge of the local culture to provide access to higher education for students in educationally underserved and high poverty areas. Additionally, this program shows how the university has been able to maximize its faculty and other resources while bringing a significant amount of additional revenue to the institution.

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