



Spring 4-3-2010

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Recommended Citation

Barney, David D. MSW, MPH, PhD; Barnett-Queen, Timothy MDiv, MSW, PhD; Duran, Betty E.S. MSW, MPH; and de la Rosa, Iván MSW, PhD (2010) "Social Work Student Interests in Rural Practice," *Contemporary Rural Social Work Journal*: Vol. 2: No. 1, Article 6.

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.61611/2165-4611.1015>

Available at: <https://digitalcommons.murraystate.edu/crsw/vol2/iss1/6>

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Social Work Student Interests in Rural Practice

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Abstract: *This study of BSW and MSW students (N = 122) in the School of Social Work at New Mexico State University reports student attitudes, concerns and interest in rural social work practice and rural social work practice curriculum. Strong support for rural social work practice and concomitant rural curriculum was evidenced by 93% who believed that social workers should practice in rural areas and 22% who ideally want to practice only in a rural community. Originally conceptualized and conducted to gather background data in support of a rural social work practice curriculum minor, its broader implications for rural social work practice curriculum are reported and discussed. Special attention is paid to implications for social work educational programs in rural states.*

Keywords: *rural, curriculum, practice, student interests*

Introduction

Social work is fundamentally a profession born from the social problems related to the industrial revolution in the great cities. The founding mothers of the profession saw urban living as contributing to disenfranchisement and oppression. Jane Adams addressed the problems of Chicago (Addams, 1909), while Mary Richmond worked to resolve issues, first in Baltimore, then with the Philadelphia Charity Organization Society, and lastly within New York. Richmond developed social casework as built on a foundation of addressing problems that were rooted in environmental conditions and social experiences. Those conditions and experiences were related to life in large urban centers (Ehrenreich, 1985).

In contrast to social work as an urban profession, however, social work practice in rural communities has gained a role in social work because of the needs and vulnerability of the rural populations. Some of these populations include those employed in the agricultural work sector (e.g., migrant farm workers) and the working class poor. Given the existence of high-risk populations in rural areas that could be well served by the profession, it is therefore important that schools of social work respond to the need for effective training to serve these groups. Many schools of social work are located in rural states and already focus on the needs of their state populations in terms of rural poverty, limited health care access, geographic isolation and social isolation.

This study examined the interest levels of graduate and undergraduate social work students for post-graduation rural-based social work practice. The objectives of the study were to assess student interest, attitudes and concerns about practice in rural communities and to identify specific rural focused curriculum options from a student perspective. These curriculum options were limited to out-of-department electives, accessibility to a minor or concentration in rural practice, and practicum or field work related.

The value of this study is that it contributes to the limited extent knowledge on rural social work practice from a student perspective. Many of the few existing articles about rural social work practice are dated. Further, this study beneficially examines student opinions about unique practice skills which are consistent with rural cultures. In consideration of the demographics of social work students it would be advantageous to examine their professional interests.

The current study was conducted on the campus of New Mexico State University (NMSU) in the southern half of New Mexico. The location of the university was relevant to the findings as New Mexico presents a profile similar to many other rural states. There are three urban centers (Albuquerque, Santa Fe, & Las Cruces) each with populations in excess of 50,000. Yet, approximately two of every three residents in the state live in rural communities (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007). On the main campus, approximately 18% of NMSU social work students came from urban centers of El Paso or Ciudad Juárez (a population center of 2.5 million within 50 miles of the NMSU main campus).

Literature Review

Some literature exists that examines the importance of rural social work practice (e.g. DeWeaver, Smith, & Hosang, 1988; Lohmann & Lohmann, 2005). Social work educators have struggled since the 1920's with rural social work practice inclusion (Martinez-Brawley, 1985). In addition, there has been attention paid to rural social work practice theory (Ginsberg, 1993) and curriculum development recommendations for educating social work students in preparation for practice in rural settings (e.g. Levin, 1974).

Social work education programs and educators have been surveyed in reference to the relative interest in and inclusion of rural social work practice curriculum (DeWeaver, 1984). The profession's literature contains a record of the social work profession's struggle to develop, maintain and expand such rural curriculum (Martinez-Brawley, 1985). Others have examined rural practice educational content as it relates to the characteristics of the social work profession, the encompassing goals of the profession and higher education, and to the organization of the higher education institution to which the social work program is anchored (Campbell, 1982). However, after reviewing the literature, no publications were located that examined student attitudes and interests for rural social work practice.

Methods

An assessment was conducted during the spring semester of 2006 to determine social work student interest, attitudes and concerns about rural social work practice and curriculum options from a student perspective. This study was a descriptive, cross-sectional design. For convenience, only students enrolled at the main NMSU campus in Las Cruces, New Mexico were included in the study. The instrument was administered to graduate and undergraduate social work students during either a social work practice or social work research class. The instrument consisted of two pages with 23 items total: five items reflecting sample demographics, ten items reflecting student interests in rural social work practice, and eight items inquiring about preferred curriculum options. Even though the survey was completed during class time, students were not given an incentive for participating in the survey.

The instrument was not normed, nor were items adapted from existing surveys. Instead, items were created to be responsive to a curricular self-study for possible development of rural social work minor at NMSU. Ultimately, findings are not generalizable. However, readers may find value in these findings for curriculum self-study and development.

Results

Demographics

A total of 122 graduate and undergraduate social work majors completed the survey. Forty-two percent (51) were juniors, 30% (36) were seniors, and 28% (34) were MSW students. The majority were undergraduates (88, 72%) and the remaining were graduate students (34, 28%). Twelve percent (15) were male and 88% (106) were female. The median age of respondents was

27 years (mean age: 29.9 years, standard deviation 9.3 years). Respondents ranged 36 years in age with the youngest being 20 years of age and the oldest being 56 years.

Eighty-six percent (101) reported having either family or friends who were living in rural areas, and 14% (17) did not have family or friends in rural areas. Some respondents had lived in rural areas as long as 50 years and some had never lived in rural areas. The median number of years that the respondent had lived in a rural area was seven years (mean, 11.3 years; standard deviation, 11.3 years). Importantly for a rural state, seven percent (8) of respondents had or currently have a Title IV-E child welfare stipend. Title IV-E graduates in New Mexico are likely to have child welfare employment in a rural community.

Social Work in Rural Communities

The majority of respondents (93.4%, 114) believed that social workers should practice in rural communities; 5.7% (7) believed that ‘maybe’ social workers should practice in rural communities; and 0.8% (1) believed that social workers should not practice in rural communities. After graduation, 54.2% (64) ideally want to practice in small urban cities, 23.7% (28) ideally want to practice in a large urban cities, and 22.0% (26) ideally want to practice in a rural area.

Ninety-seven percent (108) believe (agree or strongly agree) that it is important for social workers to understand rural cultures. Only 2.7% (3) strongly disagree with the need to understand rural cultures. When compared to urban practice skills, the majority of respondents (86.4%, 97) believed that rural social work practice requires specialized practice skills. The remaining 12.6% (14) either disagree or strongly disagree with a need for specialized skills in rural practice. Additionally, 34.2% (38) disagree or strongly disagree with the statement “I like the energy and excitement of living in a big city.” The remaining 65.8% (73) agree or strongly agree with the above statement.

Potential problems associated with rural community life were also identified. The three rural issues of greatest concern included: 30.3% (37) were concerned about lower pay in a rural; 27.3% (33) were concerned about being more isolated; 24.0% (29) were concerned about being further away from family or friends. Of lesser concern: 23.0% (28) identified increased travel time in a rural area and 6.7% (8) were concerned about being able to relate to people in rural areas.

Social Work Curriculum for Rural Practice

Sixty-one percent (67) of respondents believed that ‘a little bit’ of rural-focused content should be included in the social work curriculum. Thirty-nine percent (43) thought that ‘a lot’ of rural-focused content should be in the curriculum and none of the respondents felt there should be no rural-focused content in the curriculum. When asked if the NMSU School of Social Work should provide a concentration in rural practice, the majority (68.2%, 75) agreed, an additional 20.0% (22) strongly agreed, and 11.8% (13) disagreed with having a rural social work second-year MSW concentration.

Practicum (field experience) was another area assessed for student interest. The majority (97.3%, 107) either agreed or strongly agreed that field experience should be offered at rural agencies. Only 2.7% disagreed that field experience should be offered in rural agencies. When specifically asked, if offered a stipend to off-set travel costs, would they (the respondent) consider a field placement at a rural agency, 67.2% (74) stated that they might agree to a rural placement, whereas, 20.9% (23) disagreed and another 11.8% (13) strongly disagreed.

To offer a graduate minor in rural social work, it would be likely that a course would be required in the NMSU College of Agriculture. Respondents were asked if they would consider completing an elective offered by the NMSU College of Agriculture. Thirty-six percent (40) stated ‘yes,’ another 44.1% (49) said ‘maybe,’ and 19.8% (22) said ‘no.’

Lastly, respondents were specifically asked if they would consider completing a minor in rural social work practice. Thirty-one percent (34) stated 'yes,' another 45.0% (50) said 'maybe,' and 24.3% (27) said 'no.'

Several factors were identified that influenced student interests. In a 2x2 cross-tabulation with Pearson chi square statistics, it was identified that graduate students were statistically significantly more likely than undergraduates to find a rural community as their ideal practice setting ($\chi^2 = 4.9$, $df = 1$, $p = .027$). Also, descriptive cross-tabs counts revealed that those students who have lived a greater number of years in rural areas, as well as those with friends/family in rural areas, were more likely to ideally want to practice in a rural community. Furthermore, while not statistically significant ($\chi^2 = 2.9$, $df = 1$, $p = .086$), those who viewed a rural community as an ideal practice setting were more likely to want a greater amount of rural focused content in the curriculum. Gender was not found to be associated with desired practice setting or curriculum content.

Discussion

The foremost finding of the study was social work student acknowledgement that professional social work should target and serve rural communities. Almost all believed that social workers should practice in rural communities and 22% (26) view a rural community as their ideal practice setting. Thusly, almost all students believed that they should be prepared through curriculum to meet the needs of rural cultures and communities.

This study identified an important group of social work students who intend upon graduation to only practice in rural communities (22%). For these students, it is imperative that curriculum address rural cultures and specific rural practice skills. If the curriculum lacks rural content, students may lack adequate preparation to confront difficult rural cases, thereby resulting in diminished services to vulnerable high-risk rural populations.

In spite of positive interests in rural practice, curriculum may need to address student negative perceptions of rural practice. These areas of concern were identified and could be incorporated into a rural practice curriculum. Specifically, of most concern was a perception of lower pay within rural agencies. This may be easy to address as many rural agencies are competitive and may offer travel cost incentives. Additional concerns included increased travel time, increased isolation, and greater distance from friends and family. Only 50% were concerned about relating to the populations in rural communities.

It might be desirable to share curriculum through the co-offering of courses with a college or school of agriculture. Doing so may prove to be cost effective, but importantly, may provide a useful resource for working with the large agricultural sector in these communities. Colleges of agriculture understand key aspects of agricultural employment and lifestyles. Additionally, through cooperative extension, colleges or schools of agriculture have branch offices in every county in a state. These cooperative extension offices are a structural part of rural communities where technical information on agriculture is provided along with home economics/consumer sciences, and social service programs are often facilitated. Social work students may engage in essential outreach and networking through such connections.

Student interest in a rural practice "minor" option (at the MSW program level) existed and could be a valuable way to infuse rural content into a broader generalist or specific concentration curriculum. The value of this credential would be to give focus to an advanced generalist curriculum and prepares students to enter practice in a rural setting with rural lifestyles and cultures. These students with rural minors may be viewed as a greater asset to employers. Thus, drawing greater employment opportunities and salary.

Overall, in spite of concerns associated with rural practice (e.g., perception of lower pay, isolation from friends and families, increased travel time), almost one of four choose a rural community for their ideal practice setting. Such interests should be addressed by school of social work in rural states and should be taken into account in curriculum self-studies. Future research should address specific issues for states other than New Mexico and develop larger samples for greater generalization.

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