Success and failure in undergraduate distance education:

The experiences of two social work programs

Karen M. Neuman, Ph.D., LMSW
Associate Professor, Director
Social Work
Oakland University
Rochester, MI 48309- 4495
Neuman2@oakland.edu

And

Billy P. Blodgett, Ph.D., ACSW
BSW Program Director - Retired
Northern Michigan University

Abstract

Distance education initiatives that incorporate interactive television are explored from the perspective of two social work programs. Though both programs are of similar size and exist in the same state, one is private and located in an urban area, while the other is public and located in a rural area. Four key dimensions essential to distance education are determined to be recruitment, preadmission screening, retention or student support, and socialization of students and faculty. The BSW Program Directors who are responsible for the effective administration at each university frankly discuss perceived successes and failures that characterized their respective initiatives. Based on reflective evaluation, one administrator chose to terminate its Program's interactive television component, while the other continues to expand its outreach.

Success and failure in undergraduate distance education:

The experiences of two social work programs

Introduction

This paper presents a conceptual overview of the issues, challenges and rewards of distance education, drawn from the experiences of two undergraduate social work programs located in Michigan. Specifically, two program directors who are involved in distance education at their respective schools candidly offer their unique perspectives. Though both schools are quite similar in size and mission, they have encountered two distinct paths in their distance education initiatives. It is hoped that this type of discussion will better serve social work educators who are either currently involved in the administration of distance education programs, or may be considering such an endeavor.

Definition and History of Distance Education

The terms “distance education” and “distance learning” have been used synonymously in the literature. Each is associated with “a variety of instructional experiences that take place in a range of locations and use a mix of technologies” (Conklin & Osterndorf, 1995, p. 13). Petracchi & Morgenbesser (1995, p. 18) have defined distance education as “instruction that occurs when students are located some geographic distance from the instructor/trainer, as opposed to traditional methods of in-person instruction that occurs when the instructor is physically present at the teaching site.” Distance education has also been referred to as instruction that occurs at a point distant from the learner, with an interactive audio and/or video component (Hirschen, 1987). The Office of Technology Assessment of the United States Congress (1989)

provided an “official” definition of distance education as “the linking of a teacher and students in several geographic locations via technology that allows for instruction” (p. 5). Conklin & Ostendorf (1995) made the following summation of this congressional view:

> This definition includes the three key elements that are the use of distance education for continuing social work education. The definition clearly identifies the teacher and the learner as being essential parts of the instructional process. Second, the teacher and learner are separated by some geographic distance. Third, they are linked by technology that facilitates interaction (p. 13).

Distance education is actually an off-shoot of the historical conception of correspondence study, which was refined by the field of adult education (Lehman, 1991). University study from a distance began in the United States in 1874 at Illinois Wesleyan University (Jennings, Siegel, & Conklin, 1995). This approach to education was more closely related to correspondence study by use of mail, telegraph, and telephone. With the recent explosion of technological advancements (internet, facsimile machines, email, other television and computer developments), distance learning continues to be refined and improved.

Distance Education Literature in Social Work

Social work programs, in particular, are taking advantage of distance education. In a study by Siegel, Jennings, Conklin, & Flynn (1998), approximately one-third of the total institutions sampled offered BSW, MSW, or a combination of the two degrees taught through distance education. Interestingly, Conklin, Jennings, & Siegel (1994) found that just over 11% of social work programs offered such programs four years prior to their second study. Additionally, CSWE found that 17.4% of the 126 programs

responding indicated that they offer distance education and 42.9% reported a moderate to high likelihood of doing so in the future (Coe & Elliot, 1999).

In 1995, the Council on Social Work Education developed a comprehensive set of guidelines for distance learning in an attempt to support the emerging technology and assure quality. Although these specific guidelines were not retained in the recently revised accreditation standards, the original guidelines nevertheless provided an essential foundation for the use of the technology, stressing comparability of the learning experience, resources and outcomes between distance education and traditionally taught students (Petracchi & Patchner, 2000; Siegle, Jennings & Conklin, 1998). Consequently, much of the research takes this track, with few studies exploring other kinds of benefits and challenges encountered in distance education.

Several studies have compared achievement levels between distance learners and traditional students (Chute, Balthazar, & Poston, 1988; Cunningham, 1988; Davis, 1984, Ellis & Mathews, 1985; Grimes, Kreibel, Nielson, & Niss, 1989; Mount & Waters, 1985). Neuman (2003) explored the use of interactive television to connect diverse communities, colleges, and students. Other researchers have concentrated on applications and strategies for continuing education (Blakely, 1994; Jennings, Siegel, & Basking, 1991; Jennings, Siegel, & Conklin, 1995; Keegan, 1986; Verduin & Clark, 1991), with some focusing on telecommunication technologies and models (Blakely, 1992; Blakely & Schoenherr, 1995). Blodgett & Whipple (1997) compared rural and urban sites involved in distance education through interactive television.

Since the social work profession entails numerous fields and settings, some studies have focused on specific client groups. Rooney, Bibus, & Chou (1992)

examined the effectiveness of distance learning for child welfare work with involuntary clients. Petracchi & Morgenbesser (1995) described the use of video technology for teaching classes on substance abuse. Barker, Frisbie, & Patrick (1989); McHenry & Bozik (1995); O'Conaill, Whittaker, & Wilbur (1993); and Threlkeld, Behm, & Shiflett, (1990) have studied student interactional factors in distance education classrooms. Rutherford & Grana (1994) drew an analogy between interactive television and the creation of a blended family in the sense that risk-taking, restructuring of rules, and patience are all required in the formation of new stepfamily systems.

A growing body of research describing the benefits and challenges of distance education as well as comparison studies between traditional and alternative formats is being accumulated. Generally, equivalent student learning outcomes between groups have been found for policy (Huff, 2000), research (Petracchi & Patchner, 2001), practice (Coe & Elliot, 1999), substance abuse and child welfare (Hollister & McGee, 2000). When the entire social work curriculum is delivered via distance education, educational outcome evaluations are generally equivalent to those achieved through traditional approaches (Freddolino & Sutherland, 2000; Haga & Heitkamp, 2000).

Some indicators specific to distance learning conditions have yielded variation in student satisfaction levels. These are likely due to differences between sites, technologies, technological support, instructors, students, and access to supportive learning resources. For example, distance learning students in off-campus locations have indicated lower levels of satisfaction with advising, library and research resources than their counterparts in a traditional classroom environment (Coe & Elliot, 1999; Petracchi & Patchner, 2000). Another difference reported is that distance learners do not appear to

be as strongly identified with the program as on-campus students. However, they report a higher level of socialization with their peers, as a mutually supportive learning group naturally develops (Coe & Elliot, 1999). Some studies have indicated that given a choice, students would prefer live, face-to-face instruction (Coe & Elliot, 1999; Thyer, Arltelt, & Markward, 1998; Thyer, Polk, & Gaudin, 1997), while others have found no such difference (Haga & Heitkamp, 2000; Petracchi, 2000; Petracchi & Patchner, 2000). Distance learners in remote locations often indicate "tremendous satisfaction" with this kind of a program, but this probably reflects a general appreciation for "bringing the program to them" rather than a true preference for the format (Coe & Elliot, 1999; Haga & Heitkamp, 2000). Taken as a whole, the research suggests that although there may be some differences in student satisfaction levels with the technology and access to resources, equivalent learning-outcomes can be achieved.

Invariably, the initiatives described in the literature involve using distance education to deliver an established educational product to students already enrolled in a program or institution, or for professionals and individuals in the community who are pursuing continuing education. Little work has been done to study the broader effects of distance learning in institutions, the community, and with students and faculty. McFall and Freddolino (2000) commented: "What has not been examined is the impact of distance education programs on the individual agencies in the distant communities, on relations between and among the agencies, and ultimately on the clients and communities served" (p. 438). Their study found that distant learning programs increased the presence of students in the agency and consequently increased service hours and flexibility without dramatically increasing supervisory demands. They also found that innovations in

service delivery models were occurring as a result of the relationship between the agency and university. Others have noted the potential for interactive television to enhance students' diversity experiences as different student populations, locations, and communities are linked together through the technology. However, this aspect too remains "underdeveloped" (Macy, 2000; Potts & Kleinpeter, 2002).

Synthesis of the Literature

As the literature demonstrates, distance education is an important tool that can enhance the mission, diversity, pedagogy, and community service of academic programs and institutions. However, other issues associated with distance education deserve a thorough examination and discussion. In addition to being a costly, resource intense and complex technology, distance education often generates unanticipated challenges that may be underappreciated by an administration seeking to capitalize on an opportunity to expand services via technology. Following is a discussion of issues, challenges and considerations that the authors have encountered as part of their experiences in offering distance education. The two Midwest academic institutions in question will be referred to as "University A" and "University B" by their respective BSW Program Directors.

University A

Description of University and Region

University A is the largest of three public academic institutions located in the Upper Peninsula (U.P.) of Michigan, with a student enrollment of approximately 9,000. The U.P. is sparsely populated region that covers ---- square miles, but only has a population of 300,000 residents. The largest city in this region has a population of

20,000, where University A is located. It is the only university that offers a BSW Program, with the closest competitor being 400 miles away.

University A, like the region in which it is located, is racially homogeneous. Over 95% of both entities are Caucasian, with the largest minority group (3%) being of Native American descent. Any industry of note is related to mining, fishing, or forestry. Emphasis on nature and the land attests to its rural characteristics. Over 90% of the students at University A are from this region, and are the first generation to attend college.

Description of BSW Program and Distance Education Initiative

The BSW Program at University A is combined with the Sociology Department, and is housed within the College of Professional Studies. It has been accredited through CSWE since 1974, and currently has 125 social work majors. University A has an enrollment of approximately 9,000 students, and has been offering some social work courses at a community college located 65 miles away since 1993. In 1997, the BSW Program received approval from CSWE to offer the full BSW curriculum at this community college as a distance education initiative. Under this plan, students complete most freshman and sophomore-level offerings at their community college. Upper division cognate courses and all Social Work courses are offered through interactive television (ITV) from University A or taught on site by its faculty.

University A anticipated that 25-30 students would enroll for each cohort scheduled every other year. The first cohort would enter in the winter of 1998 and graduate in the winter of 2001. The second cohort would enter in the winter of 2000 and

graduate in the winter of 2003, while the third (and current) cohort would enter in the winter of 2002 and graduate in the winter of 2005.

After one year into the Program, these students are required to formally apply to the BSW Program, based on course completion and required grade point average (2.5 in a 4.0 system). Unfortunately, the attrition rate for each cohort has been approximately 50% after one year. Furthermore, the original anticipated numbers never materialized, and only 15 students enrolled for each cohort. Twenty students have graduated in the first three cohorts. Based on what is perceived to be a low return versus a high investment on the part of the faculty, the Social Work Program has decided to terminate this distance education initiative after the graduation of the third cohort.

Enrollment and Preparation of Students

In order for a distance education initiative to be successful, sufficient numbers of students are needed to sustain momentum. In the case of University A, approximately 15 students entered a cohort system every other year. They would formally apply to the upper-division social work program after the first semester, pending whatever grade point average was earned in required courses. In each of the three cohorts, attrition rates were 50% after the first year into the program. By the time these student groups entered their senior year, only a handful was left. Eventually, University A decided to cancel the distance education initiative after three cohorts because of low numbers. Quite succinctly, the cost and effort of offering such a program was not worth the returns.

If in fact the original fifteen students in each cohort had finished the program, the distance education initiative could justifiably be continued. Consequently, the problem may not simply revolve around low numbers, but rather, poor preparation and/or

advisement of students. The academic rigors of this particular community college did not adequately prepare students to successfully complete a four-year university degree. The few that actually graduated from the Program were indeed highly motivated, intelligent students. The many students who could not obtain the required grade point average, however, simply did not have the educational background to succeed.

Community

The concept of "community" is usually viewed as a unified whole in social work literature. Properties of location and ideology may define its essence (Hutchison, 2004). In the case of University A, it is ironic that the distance education initiative involved a "community" college. Students at this community college had pre-established relationships with each other, and naturally identified with their academic institution. Although they were shifting their enrollment fees and tuition to University A, they still remained in their community college classrooms, and retained their cohesive allegiance as a remote site.

The on-campus students at University A too had developed their own sense of community. After all, they did not voluntarily choose to enroll in ITV classes, but rather found themselves sitting in unusual classrooms with television monitors and audio equipment. Though they represented the live transmission site, it became clear that they considered the technology as an awkward and intrusive experience. In essence, a "we vs. they" phenomenon developed between the two sites. There was no outward hostility expressed, but instructors could often sense the exasperation, particularly from the on-campus group towards the off-campus group. Course evaluations for ITV sections were notoriously lower than for other traditional classroom sections. Similarly, the remote site

groups often developed a “sense of entitlement,” seemingly never satisfied with course requirements.

Instruction and Support

If the morale of students was not always positive, the same might also be said of the instructors who taught the ITV classes. Like the students, social work instructors did not have a choice in teaching these distance education cohorts. They simply had to adapt to the technology, assume television personalities, and given no pay incentives for the extra burden. Essentially, the whole ITV experience simply made for more students and more work for the same pay. There also were no remote-site instructors to help buffer the two entities. Technicians were close at hand at both sites, but it was the sole responsibility of each on-site instructor to mediate lectures, discussions, and exams. Exams had to be mailed to the remote site a few days before their administration, and not always did this preparation smoothly commence.

Advising and Program Coordination

The BSW Program Director happened to be living in the same community where the community college was located at the time the distance education initiative was enacted. Consequently, he served as the advisor to those students who were preparing to enter each cohort. Additionally, University A had hired a distance education coordinator at the community college, not solely for the Social Work Program, but for other departments that had distance education classes through the community college. That person served as the main contact for the mailing of syllabi, exams, and coordinating ITV classrooms.

The BSW Program Director at University A received no additional compensation or release time for the coordination of the distance education program. He typically would commute to the community college twice a month in order to meet with students and negotiate any programmatic issues.

Lessons Learned

As with any initiative, there are lessons to be learned in both success and failure. Many of the shortcomings have already been identified, including: too few students in cohorts, poor academic and/or advising preparation, the development of divisive student factions, and the possible compromise in academic quality. Faculty members often felt unappreciated, isolated, and overwhelmed with responsibility. In short, there was little incentive to remain vested in such an endeavor.

However, there is value in every experience. A few remote-site students often traveled the 65 miles to the originating site and vice versa. Some lasting friendships were made between the two groups, and a few students sincerely were grateful in given the opportunity to complete a degree with little or no commuting. In fact, twenty (20) students graduated from the three combined cohorts, and student numbers rose in the Social Work Program due to the cohorts.

Some instructors gained confidence and energy by engaging this technological challenge. Consideration of appropriate teaching pedagogy often permeated the discussion in faculty meetings. It is still fair to say that the large majority of faculty are relieved that this distance education initiative will be terminated in a few months, but all will admit to professional growth by participating in this project.

University B

Description of University and Region

University B is a private, faith-based institution serving approximately 4,000 undergraduate and graduate students. The University is located in a suburb of Detroit, with a community that is overwhelmingly white. Off-campus and distance education initiatives have long been an important strategy for the University to increase its diversity as well as to extend its mission. The Social Work Program at University B has been accredited since 1974 and is an autonomous department situated within the College of Social Sciences. Currently, the program has approximately 130 majors. Seventy-five students take their courses at the main campus. The remaining students are enrolled in two off campus sites – one in the inner city of Detroit and a second distance education program.

The Social Work distance education program at University B was established in 1996 at the request of business and educational leaders in northern Michigan, (approximately 300 miles away) who had convened a consortium to explore the educational and training needs in the area. Although rural and sparsely populated, the area had been experiencing strong growth as city dwellers returned to the country and "baby boomers" retired. The growth in the area, coupled with the relative isolation and economics of the community exacerbated the need for trained social service personnel who can address the issues of substance abuse, child abuse and neglect, domestic violence, home care, hospice care, developmental disabilities, elder care and other social issues. The decision to offer a social work program was an appropriate response to meet

the needs of the community and University B was approached by the consortium and community college partners to develop such a program.

Description of BSW Program and Distance Education Initiative

The social work program at University B offers its entire curriculum via distance education over a two and a half year cycle. Courses primarily originate from the main campus and are transmitted via two-way interactive television to its rural location in northern Michigan**.** Occasionally, a course will be taught at the distance site, where it may be transmitted to the main campus. Students attend on a part-time basis with classes scheduled on alternating Saturdays from 9:00 - 4:30, with an occasional evening class. This schedule best meets the needs of the students in the program who are typically older, employed full-time and often commuting a long distance.

The curriculum in both locations is the same, with the exception of the schedule for field practicum and content in the community practice course. Students in Northern Michigan do their first semester of field practicum Spring/Summer term and complete it the following fall semester, graduating in December. This helps to avoid difficulties for students completing field as scheduled due to inclement weather, which can be a problem in the winters of Northern Michigan. Because of the different community contexts and characteristics of the communities for the two locations, the community practice course is modified. Students in the main campus, suburban location, use a supplement that deals with urban communities. Students in the remote community work from a supplement that is suitable for rural social work. Diversity content that explores differences between rural and urban communities is also stressed.

Enrollment and preparation of students

The Program was established as a degree completion program for students with an Associates Degree from one of three area community colleges. Students follow an articulation agreement that assures that they have completed all of their prerequisites. They are generally well prepared and highly motivated for the program. Extensive recruiting activities occur the summer before each cycle of the program begins, and the program strives to recruit 20-25 students per cohort, which provides a margin for attrition. Typically, four or five students will not complete the program. Students who fail to complete the program most often decide or advised to pursue a different field but occasionally drop out due to health, personal, and family problems. Because of the cycle of courses, students who seek to reenter the program will experience a lengthy delay before they can resume their courses, and this likely encourages those who are able to complete the program to do so, even in the face of difficulties.

To date, over one hundred students have graduated and 25 are currently enrolled. The lack of educational alternatives, strong advising and program coordination as well as rigorous preadmission screening contributes to a high retention rate of approximately 83%, which is higher than that of the main campus.

Community

The relationship between the community and University B remains strong through active engagement in the consortium. Students who graduate from the ITV program now serve as field instructors to subsequent cohorts of students. The community recently approved a mileage for construction of a new university center, which is shared by

members of the consortium and a technology center and offers state of the art facilities, office space, computer labs, etc. for University B's distance educational offerings. As a result of the pioneering efforts of the Social Work Department, University B has expanded its offerings to include ITV degree completion programs in nursing and criminal justice, two other professions that are in demand in Northern Michigan.

Instruction and Support

The instructional model used by University B is resource intensive with excellent technological support at both sites as well as teaching support at the distant site. The primary instructor prepares course material for the class session in consultation with an MSW site-facilitator who provides instruction support at the remote location. Technicians are in the both classrooms at all times class in session. This level of technical support assures that the expertise and skills of the instructor and MSW site facilitator are not compromised by having to address technical difficulties during the period.

MSW site facilitators compensated at .33 of the adjunct rate for teaching a course and receive an additional .5 sh compensation if they assisting with the professional advising of students. In recognition of the demands of teaching over ITV, faculty members receive additional compensation when the combined enrollment in both locations of an ITV course exceed twenty-five students.

Instructors teaching over ITV at University B go through a two-hour, personalized training session with Media Services. The emphasis of the training is on pedagogy, rather than the technology, as the instructors will have the support of a technician when they are teaching courses over ITV. Instructors are oriented to the equipment, are helped in

getting accustomed to the sound delay that occurs when voices are transmitted over distances, and advised how to conduct class discussions so that one person at a time speaks. Suggestions for using PowerPoint, the web, and other computer programs over the ITV format are provided. Personalized camera settings are pre-programmed for each instructor, taking into account whether they stand, sit or move about. Often, a strong relationship develops between an instructor and the technician assigned to the course, and Media Services makes every effort to match instructors with their preferred technician.

Another important relationship that supports instruction has been developed through the commitment of the University's library staff and instructional technology staff assigned to the ITV program. The library has made an extensive commitment to developing an e-collection that can be accessed from remote locations. After trying to teach students how to access the electronic database over ITV, the librarian decided to travel to the distant site for face-to-face instruction. This was far more successful and again, was appreciated by the students who often establish a first name basis with our librarian and consider her a key support in their learning. Similarly, the instructional technology staff elected to travel to the distant location to orient the students to BlackBoard, which is used to enhance most or all of the ITV courses offered. Typically, this is done once per cohort, but occasionally, additional face-to-face instruction has been requested and provided.

Advising and Program Coordination

In addition to strong community support, the University B program is successful due in large part to strong advising and program coordination. The importance of adequate release time, particularly when commuting over long distances cannot be

minimized. A full-time faculty member is afforded 50% release time to provide academic advising and coordinate the program. The Coordinator typically makes three or four trips per semester to the remote location, staying from a few days to a week, depending on the needs of the students and her availability. During these visits, she will deliver books, advise students, register students and assist with financial aid and admissions applications. Program evaluation data from University B indicates that students in the remote location are more satisfied with student services than students on main campus, due to the level of personalized attention provided by the Coordinator.

Lessons learned

The success of University B's distance education can be attributed to the following conditions: 1) adequate support for program coordination; 2) strong, competent, and engaged technical support; 3) state of the art equipment and facilities; 4) the resource intensive model; 5) continued community engagement and 6) the lack of competition in the area. The location of a distance education program is key to its success. If situated too closely to main campus or to competing programs, students who are able to may simply elect to commute rather than select the ITV program. However, the site cannot be so remote so as to preclude offering adequate resources for field practicum and community based experiences. University B's program is ideally situated, about an hour from the community colleges, two hours away from any competitor and three hours away from the main campus. The lack of alternatives to the ITV program of University B contributes to the high degree of appreciation that students express for the program and the opportunity it provides.

Issues for consideration

The decision to offer a social work program over interactive television must be thoughtfully considered. Failure to do so can result in tensions between student groups, faculty burnout, and the compromising of academic standards**.** Based on the experiences of the two programs described above, four key dimensions essential to distance education are discussed. These are: recruitment, preadmission screening, retention and socialization.

Recruitment

When recruiting a cohort system for distance education classes, it is imperative that sufficient numbers are in place in order to sustain such an arrangement. In the case of University A, it was anticipated that 20-25 students would enter each cohort. These numbers never materialized, however, and in fact, only 15 students constituted each cohort. Even this number was deemed sufficient to proceed, but unexpectedly, high attrition rates began to compromise the effective continuation of the cohort arrangement. Early cost-benefit analysis determined that any student number below 8 would render the distance education initiative unprofitable. Even though educators may not like to think in terms of profit-loss margins when student earning seems primary, the reality of economic feasibility cannot be ignored.

Although University B operates with an average distance education cohort size of just five more (20) than University B, an important variable in the formula is the number students on main campus who are recruited for Saturday course offerings. They function

as a “complimentary” cohort. This past academic year, separate recruiting strategies were developed for the distance cohort and the complimentary on-site group. This yielded an additional ten to twelve students per course who enrolled in Saturday ITV courses at the main campus. Taken together, this created a group of between 35- 37 students simultaneously participating in one course offered in two locations, thereby enhancing the financial feasibility of the program.

Preadmission screening

Because distance education programs may be located in relatively isolated and educationally underserved communities, careful attention to the academic preparation and suitability of candidates must be provided. The pressure to recruit a cohort of adequate size must be balanced with careful screening of applicants. Students with vague educational goals such as completing “any” degree or wanting to “help others’ must be screened for suitability for the profession as well as the program. Students who are academically weak must be evaluated in consideration of the learning supports available. Finally, students must understand the expectations of a professional degree program (including field) and be assisted in assessing their ability to successfully realistically evaluating their capacity to complete the program successfully**.**

Obviously, both University A and B conducted orientation sessions in an effort to socialize perspective students who were contemplating the respective distance education programs. However, University B arguably spent more time in conducting individual student interviews to better assess potential success in the program. University A conducted one group session to all potential candidates the semester prior to cohort

admission, while University B tended to offer sequential stages where advising, recruitment, and screening occurred.

Retention

Perhaps the initial numbers themselves are not as crucial as the ability to retain the vast majority of students in each cohort throughout the educational curriculum. Students enrolling in these kinds of alternative educational programs often have additional challenges and demands that can affect their ability to complete the program successfully. They are typically older and work more hours than traditional students, and often have family responsibilities. They may not be socialized to or prepared for a university environment and the expectations of a professional degree. Preadmission screening of these students is crucial in assessing the academic preparation and suitability for the profession. Adequate mechanisms for academic support and advising must be provided to enhance retention.

Rather than scrutinizing the initial numbers associated with each cohort, a better indicator of potential success might be the establishment of mechanisms to enhance the likelihood of program completion. Advising, screening, and recruitment strategies have already been discussed as essential components in the distance education initiative. The bottom-line, unfortunately, is predicated on the question as to whether or not each student can literally “make the “grade.”

Based on CSWE professional standards, each BSW (and MSW) program utilizes an admissions procedure based on grades. An application process to enter certain upper-division courses often incorporates grade-point averaging and/or a minimum grade that is

required for the successful transition through the curriculum. Grade inflation may in fact be a subtle phenomenon that unfortunately occurs in some social work programs in an effort to retain adequate student numbers. This accusation is difficult to confirm, much less, empirically analyze. A legitimate topic of consideration, however, is the actual procedure utilized by social work programs in establishing admission standards.

University A and University B incorporate different standards when considering course grades for program admission. University A utilizes a grade point average in a cluster of required courses, while University B considers a specific grade for each course. Specifically, University A requires a 2.5 GPA in three lower-division social work courses, plus a 2.5 GPA in seven additional courses that constitute a "cluster minor." When a student applies to the advanced social work curriculum, a computer program is used to calculate these grade point averages. A GPA of 2.499 is not sufficient to continue in the program, regardless of other considerations. Any student may repeat a course in an effort to raise one's grade point average, but in a cohort arrangement, failure to meet the required standard at the specific time will necessitate termination from the program.

University B, on the other hand, requires that a minimum grade of "C" (2.0) be obtained in selected courses. Both students and professors are cognizant of this standard. This acute awareness provides immediate feedback after the completion of each course. Each professor knows at the time a grade is rendered whether or not this will facilitate or impede transition through the program. Concomitantly, each student knows whether or not to retake a course very early in the process. A student at University A, on the other hand, has to wait until a grade point average can be computed on a cluster of courses before further considerations can be made.

In essence, students at University B have quicker feedback and more time to plan for courses when compared to students at University A. This knowledge in and of itself may foster a higher retention rate so that cohorts may proceed efficiently through the program. The difference between a 2.0 for each class and a 2.5 average for a cluster of classes also has major attrition rate implications. Also, professors at University A perhaps are not as affected by their submission of course grades, as their grade is only one of many when considering a cluster of courses. Professors at University B may be less likely to submit a grade below "C," as this action would essentially constitute failing a student. Again, accusations of grade inflation are not inferred here, but rather, each professor at University B might be more internally conflicted when assigning grades, when compared to professors at University A. The ultimate reality with this discussion is the recognition that University B is more effective than University A in retaining student cohorts. High attrition rates at University A, in effect, have led to the cessation of its distance education program.

Socialization and Cohesiveness

As previously discussed, each academic class has the tendency to develop its own personality and sense of cohesiveness. This phenomenon is true regarding any group existence. Any instructor can attest to teaching two sections of the same course, yet experience very different class reactions. Teaching one course to two sections at the same time, however, presents unique group dynamics.

It is important for both sites to develop a sense of unity rather than separate identities. Obviously, the latter occurrence cannot be completely nullified due to the

logistical separation of sites via technology. However, distance education initiatives need to strategically target socialization programs for remote sites in an effort to enhance a spirit of inclusion throughout the academic process. Failure to do so may promote a sense of alienation from the remote-site perspective, and possible resentment from the originating site.

Both University A and B were aware of this important consideration, but University B seemingly integrated more opportunities for the development of socialization and cohesiveness. Its instructors were expected to travel to the distant site (preferably the third or fourth week of class) and originate the course there. Instructors at University A also practiced this routine, though the visits often occurred towards the end of the semester. Since the driving time for University A instructors was only an hour, each instructor at University A left the remote site shortly after class and drove back to the main campus. Essentially, the instructors at University A retained more of a "television personality" rather than developing a more intimate student-instructor relationship.

University B was aided in some part by a further distance between sites, as well as the weekend arrangement. Instructors stayed over Friday night, taught their Saturday class, and typically went out for dinner with some of the students before returning home. Additionally, frequent "potluck" dinners were planned for the remote site, as well as student organizational meetings and workshops. An interesting concept was developed by University B where remote-site students would travel to the main campus for a weekend "homecoming," hosted by students of the originating site. These traveling students would stay in the dormitory and even have lunch with the University President.

The remote-site, in turn, would often then host a similar extravaganza for an autumn color weekend. These kinds of activities attest to the importance in developing a sense of shared community that goes both ways across the distance.

Conclusions

Although this paper's primary focus has been on interactive television and the issues and considerations presented limited to that modality, distance education in the broadest sense (web based and/or other video courses) continues to offer many unique and exciting opportunities for educators. For small programs, it offers the opportunity to increase student enrollment and promote diversity. It can also enhance the program's visibility within the University and create opportunities for interdepartmental and interinstitutional collaboration. Teaching with technology can improve an instructor's skills and pedagogy, and be a stimulating experience. Providing educational programming to remote areas and underserved communities is consistent with the values and mission of social work. However, distance education is not without challenges and controversy. Success or failure depends on adequate supports to recruit, screen and support students; enhance classroom learning with instructional facilitators; train and assist faculty with technology; and successfully engage faculty, students and the community in the educational endeavor of offering a professional degree program over distance education.

References

Barker, B.O., Frisbie, A.G., & Patrick, K.R. (1989). Broadening the Definition of Distance Education in Light of the New Telecommunication Technologies. *The American Journal of Distance Education. 3,* 20-29.

Blakely, T.J. (1994). Strategies for Distance Learning. *Journal of Continuing Social Work Education, 6 (1),* 4-7.

Blakely, T. J. (1992). A Model for Distance Education Delivery. *Journal of Social Work Education, 28,* 214-221.

Blakely, T.J. & Schoenherr, P. (1995). Telecommunication Technologies in Social Work Distance Education. *Journal of Continuing Social Work Education, 6(3),* 8-12.

Blodgett, B.P. & Whipple, E.E. (1997). Sociological Variables Affecting Client Issues: A Comparison of Distance Education Sites. *Clinical Sociology Review, 15,* 135-152.

Chute, A., Balthazer, L. & Poston, C. (1998). Learning from Teletraining. *American Journal of Distance Education, 2(3),* 55-63.

Coe, J. R. & Elliot, D. (1999). An evaluation of teaching direct practice courses in distance education program for rural settings. *Journal of Social Work Education. 35 (3),* 353-565.

Conklin, J.J. & Ostendorf, W. (1995). Distance Learning in Continuing Social Work Education: Promise of the Year 2000. *Journal of Continuing Social Work Education, 6 (3),* 13-17.

Conklin, J. J., Jennings, L., and Siegel, E. (1994). National Survey Data on Distance Education. Unpublished manuscript

Cunningham, B.M. (1988). The Telecourse as an Alternative to a Traditional In class Accounting Course. *Community and Junior College Quarterly, 12 (3),* 55-61.

Davis, D.J. (1984). Evaluation and Comparison of Teleconference Training with Face-to-Face Training and the Effects on Attitudes and Learning. *Dissertation Abstracts International, 46*: DA8505794.

Ellis, L. & Mathis, D. (1985). College Student Learning Room Televised Versus Conventional Classroom Lectures: A Controlled Experiment. *Higher Education, 14,* 165-173.

Freddolino, P.P. & Sutherland, C.A. (2000). Assessing the Comparability of Classroom Environments in Graduate Social Work Education Delivered Via Interactive Instructional Television. *Journal of Social Work Education, 36 (1),* 115-129.

Grimes, P., Krehbiel, J., Nielsen, J. & Niss, J. (1989). The Effectiveness of Economics USA on Learning and Attitudes. *Journal of Economic Education, 20 (2),* 139-152.

Haga, H. & Heitkamp, T. (2000). Bringing Social Work Education to the Prairie. *Journal of Social Work Education, 36 (2),* 309-324.

Hirschen, B. (1987). Video Vision: A Publication on Instructional Television, Video Production, and Distance Learning. Albany, N.Y.: New York State Education Dept.

Hollister, C.D. & McGhee, G. (2000). Delivering Substance Abuse and Child Welfare Content Through Interactive Television. *Research on Social Work Practice, 10 (4),* 416-427.

Huff, M.T. A Comparison Study of Live Interaction Versus Interactive Television for Teaching MSW Students Critical Thinking Skills. *Teaching and Social Work, 10 (4),* 400-416.

Hutchison, E.D. (2003). *The Dimensions of Human Behavior: The Changing Life Course.* Sage Publications.

Jennings, J.G., Siegel, E., & Baskind, F.R. (1991) Teaching Techniques for Instructional Interactive Television. In *Proceedings of Orlando Multimedia '92*. Warrenton. VA: Society for Learning Technology.

Jennings, J.G., Siegel, E., & Conklin J. (1995). Social Work Education and Distance Learning: Applications for Continuing Education. *Journal of Continuing Social Work Education, 6 (3),* 3-7.

Keegan, D. (1986). *The Foundations of Distance Education.* London: Croom Helm.

Lehman, R.M. (1991). *Perceptual Interaction: A Theoretical Context for Distance Education Program Developmental Design.* Madison: University of Wisconsin, unpublished doctoral dissertation.

Macy, J.A. (2000). *A View From the Other Side: MSW Student Experiences in an Alternative (Distance) Program.* Paper presented at APM, CSWE.

McFall, J.P. & Freddolino, P.P. (2000). The Impact of Distance Education Programs on Community Agencies. *Research on Social Work Practice, 10 (4),* 438-453.

McHenry, L. & Bozik, M. (1995). Communicating at a Distance: A Study of Interaction in a Distance Education Classroom. *Communication Education, 44,* 362-371.

Neuman, K. (2003). *Using Distance Education to Connect Diverse Communities, Colleges, and Students.* Paper presented at Baccalaureate Program Directors Annual Meeting, Reno, NV.

O'Conaill, B., Whittaker, S., & Wilbur, S. (1993). Conversations Over Video Conferences: An Evaluation of the Spoken Aspects of Video-Mediated Communication. *Human-Computer Interaction, 8,* 389-428.

Petracchi, H.E. (2000). Distance Education: What Do Our Students Tell Us? *Research on Social Work Practice, 10 (3),* 362-376.

Petracchi, H.E., & Morgenbesser, M. (1995). The Use of Video and One-Way Broadcast Technology to Deliver Continuing Social Work Education: A Comparative Assessment of Student Learning. *Journal of Continuing Social Work Education, 6 (3),* 18-22.

Petracchi, H.E. & Patchner, M. (2000). Social Work Students and Their Learning Environment: A Comparison of Interactive Television, Face-to-Face Instruction, and the Traditional Classroom. *Journal of Social Work Education, 36 (2),* 335-346.

Potts, M.K., & Kleinpeter, C.B. (2002). *Distance Education: An Evaluation of a Five-Campus Collaborative MSW Program.* Paper presented at the Baccalaureate Program Directors Annual Conference, Denver, CO.

Rooney, R.H., Bibus, A.A., & Chou, Y.C. (1992). *Child Welfare Training in Work with Involuntary Clients: Final Report.* Washington D.C.: Office of Human Development Services, U.S. Dept. of Health and Human Services.

Rutherford, L.H., & Grana, S. (1994). Fully Activating Interactive TV: Creating a Blended Family. *Technological Horizons in Education, 22 (3),* 86-90.

Siegel, E., Jennings, J.G., & Conklin, J. (1998). Distance Learning in Social Work Education: Results and Implications of a National Survey. *Journal of Social Work Education, 34 (1),* 71-80.

Siegel, E., Jennings, J.G., Conklin, J., and Flynn, S.A. (1998). Distance Learning in Social Work Education: Results and Implications of a National Survey. *Journal of Social Work Education, 34*: 71-80.

Threlkeld, R.M., Behm, R.J., & Schiflett, M. (1990). Live and Interactive: Is It Really Important? In CC. Gibson (Ed.), *Echoes From the Future: Challenges for New Learning Systems.* Proceedings of the Annual Conference on Distance Teaching and Learning. Madison, WI: University of Wisconsin. (ERIC Document Service No. ED 340-353.

Thyer, B.A., Artelt, T.A., & Markward, M.K. (1998). Evaluating Distance Learning in Social Work Education: A Replication Study. *Journal of Social Work Education, 34 (20),* 291-295.

Thyer, B.A., Polk, G., & Gaudin, J.G. (1997). Distance Learning in Social Work Education: A Preliminary Evaluation. *Journal of Social Work Education, 33,* 363-367.

Verduin, J.R., & Clark, T.A. (1991). *Distance Education.* San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.