SOCIAL WORK IN ACTION

Community Demand, Academic Partnership, and the Birth of the Bachelor of Social Work Program Distance Education Option

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Social Work in Action is a solicited column from the social work community in Hawai‘i. It is edited by HJMPH Contributing Editor Sophia Kim PhD, of the Myron B. Thompson School of Social Work at the University of Hawai‘i at Manoa.

The Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) program at the University of Hawai‘i at Manoa (UHM) Myron B. Thompson School of Social Work (MBTSSW) extended its academic reach in Fall 2019 by offering a distance education (DE) option in addition to its campus-based option. The Master of Social Work (MSW) Program at the school has had an acclaimed DE option for over a decade. When conducting site visits, providing academic advising, or actively recruiting for graduate school, adding a distance option at the baccalaureate level was a common request. In the summer of 2018, students attending the MSW DE option new student orientation were asked if they would have pursued a BSW degree had the opportunity been available. The response was a near unanimous “yes”. This response resonated with informal feedback we had been receiving over the years from administrators, instructors, and students from neighbor island four-year colleges and community colleges, as well as representatives from the social service sector from geographically distant regions of the state, including rural areas of O‘ahu and the less populated neighbor islands of Kaua‘i, Maui, Hawai‘i Island, Lana‘i and Moloka‘i.

The MBTSSW initiated the new BSW DE option through a partnership with Outreach College (OC), which was designed to extend the resources of the state’s flagship campus, the University of Hawai‘i at Mānoa, to the community and world by presenting year-round, lifelong learning opportunities for both traditional and nontraditional students. This column articulates the process and birth of the BSW Program Distance Education option.

Benefits of Expanded Educational Options in Social Work

Pursuing higher education in social work satisfies multiple needs. First, it provides a legitimate professional endeavor with reasonable wages. While social workers are unlikely to strike it rich, those who earn their degree in social work are unlikely to experience unemployment. According to Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS), the number of practicing social workers grew by 15.5% between 2004-2005 and 2014-2015. Healthcare social workers were the fastest growing group, with an increase of 45%. Second, those earning a degree in social work can make a near immediate impact in their community. People from small communities know best the unique strengths and concerns that permeate their particular community and are best suited to access those community strengths to address systemic problems.

Finally, earning a degree in social work, especially through a DE option, directly addresses concerns around brain drain. Community representatives from the neighbor islands have shared their frustrations over higher education options that leave students feeling forced to leave their homes for O‘ahu or the continental US to earn their degree. Many of these students then stay away, pursuing work opportunities in their new communities. Distance education for social work assures that students have the opportunity to learn while remaining in their community, where they can stay to practice if they choose. This is not to say that students should shun opportunities in other, often larger communities, but many want to learn and work in their home community and, being forced to move away jeopardizes many of their hopes and dreams even as some are met.

Barriers to a Baccalaureate Degree in Social Work

Earning a BSW from UH Mānoa requires the satisfactory completion of 120 credit hours, including general education requirements, 38 credit hours that are taken directly from the BSW program, and 21 credit hours earned by taking specific upper-division electives outside of the program, for example from American studies, political science, public health, psychology, women’s studies, and disability studies.

Although the community expressed a desire for social work education, there were three main barriers to extending the BSW program through distance or online offerings to neighbor islands:

- Technological capacity
- Human resources, including faculty who could teach in a distance/online format
- Access for students to courses outside of the required social work courses, including general education courses and upper division electives

Early on, two of these challenges were met. The MBTSSW houses three academic social work programs including bac-
calaureate, master’s, and doctoral programs, and the master’s program has offered a DE option for more than 10 years. The program has been recognized as one of the top DE options in the country. Thus, the school had in place the necessary technolog- ical capacity to meet the needs of those living far from Mānoa as well as the human resources necessary to administer a DE option at the baccalaureate level. In fact, in trying to keep an eye to the future, recent faculty recruitment efforts have included the expectation for capacity to teach in the online setting, as- suring workforce and curriculum flexibility. This left the final challenge, ensuring non-social work course availability, as the remaining major barrier to launching a DE option of the BSW Program.

**Working with Outreach College**
In the spring of 2017, the deans of the MBTSSW and the OC attended a DE conference on the continental US and began exploring the possibility of an online BSW degree. With con- versations happening at the highest reaches of the university and a ground swell of support from the community, a mutually beneficial partnership was formed. The OC became the answer for issues outside of the BSW program’s control, most importantly, the need to offer the courses outside of the social work curriculum. Course offerings from OC number in the hundreds, and many are offered online in both synchronous and asynchronous formats. What the OC had not offered to date was a pathway to a baccalaureate-level degree. With our existing BSW curriculum, the demand for social workers in the community, and the extensive number of offerings through OC, the stage was set to launch the BSW DE option.

**Program Design**
One key to the successful launch of the new program was the ability to tap into the existing in-house expertise. The MSW program has gone to great lengths to assure that the quality of education in the DE option is identical to that of our campus- based option. The leaders of the BSW program were clear that we would demand nothing less than the best and would do the same as our graduate program to assure a quality education. We did not want to create a two-tier system or an unequal status for those who would pursue an online education.

Still, we knew there needed to be some differences. Although the campus based BSW program has typically enjoyed a greater percentage of non-traditional students than other programs here at UH Mānoa, it was expected that adding distance learning option would include still more students of non-traditional backgrounds. Many of those who would pursue a BSW are first generation college students, often working in the field in an auxiliary or paraprofessional capacity. Additionally, many are raising keiki (children) and taking care of their kupuna (elders). Moreover, we appreciate that the cost of tuition at UH Mānoa is an economic challenge for many who would apply for our program. These variables, taken together, mandated innovation.

**Condensed Courses**
We have learned that students who struggle in school do so because life can get bigger than the individual. Economic, fa- milial, vocational, spiritual, cultural and educational demands can become overwhelming, and it is not unusual for school to be the first life activity to be let go. Unfortunately, when students are simultaneously enrolled in four classes, each running for 16 weeks, it is common for students to struggle in all four. In fact, “lost semesters” occur all too frequently for far too many. For this reason, instead of running the traditional 16-week courses, the leadership of the BSW DE option decided to create 5-week accelerated courses. Condensed or accelerated courses, similar to those offered across the country in summer session are often appreciated by students who need to gain ground on their educational goals. Most prospective students we talked to across the state seemed to both desire and appreciate accelerated courses, but in order for 5-week courses to be successful, additional changes were needed.

**A Sequential Curriculum**
To maintain continuity, accelerated courses must be taken in succession. This represents the second major change to the curriculum. Instead of running several 16-week courses con- currently, we run three 5-week courses serially. Students take one course at a time, committing all of their academic time and attention to a single effort. Students consistently praised this model for the singular focus outlined above, but also because when life gets too big, pushing through a single course seems much more tenable than trying to succeed in four courses taken concurrently. Interestingly, there is research showing improved knowledge retention by students enrolled in accelerated courses as opposed to longer 16-week courses taken concurrently over a semester. The authors postulate that some of the improved retention may be the result of immersion in course content as opposed to distributed learning over an extended time when courses are taken concurrently.2

**The Asynchronous Classroom**
The final change to the curriculum involved a shift from the synchronous to an asynchronous classroom. Many of our students have more than one job, or have varied schedules for other reasons. Hawai‘i has huge wealth disparities, with a high cost of living and rampant underemployment. Any attempt to increase educational accessibility must include offerings that fit our prospective students’ varied schedules. Asking a student to change their employment status (get a different job, rearrange their work schedule, or reduce their total hours) may not be a reasonable request. If we truly want to extend educational oppor- tunities, then we had to account for the diversity of experiences relative to the work, family, school triangle. The asynchronous classroom provides an opportunity for students to access an education within the students’ often hectic schedule.
While the asynchronous model is widely applauded, some faculty and staff had concerns about applying the model to social work. They were concerned about: 1) delivering content for a discipline/profession that is fundamentally a person-to-person endeavor; 2) assessing student performance, particularly critical thinking and empathic listening; 3) navigating a digital divide for those with either limited resources or lower technological acumen; and 4) monitoring student engagement.

We addressed these concerns through several fundamental interventions. These include, 1) an annual in-person orientation to the program that helps students develop a sense of community with faculty, staff, and their fellow students and importantly creates an investment in the program, as well as their education; 2) frequent synchronous connections or contact points within the virtual classroom to facilitate communication skill acquisition and skill assessment; 3) regular academic and professional advising that is held both online through programs like Zoom and Skype, as well as in-person during field site visits; and 4) opportunities to fully participate in the extracurricular activities like student government through the use of technologies like Zoom, Skype and Google Hangouts.

New Learning
With just 1 year of experience running an asynchronous, accelerated, sequential curriculum we are acutely aware that we have much to learn. Still, some of the most pressing questions have been answered, and we already have ideas for improving the option. We now know that 5-week accelerated courses can be every bit as rigorous and demanding as 16-week courses. We did well in preparing our students for the intensity of condensed and accelerated courses, but less well preparing our faculty. We received consistent reports from our instructors that running an online condensed course was an around-the-clock ordeal. When students fall behind, there is little time to catch up, and the same is true for faculty. Building in small breaks of 2-4 days between courses provides a window for students to make up late work and catch their breath.

We knew that we wanted to build a sense of community in the cohort and utilized several synchronous “points of contact” to ensure this happened. Students, however, seemed to struggle navigating the synchronous components of the curriculum in light of its largely asynchronous nature, which in turn negatively impacted attendance at required program activities like the field integration seminar. Here, communication seems to be key. As our Distance Education Option Director Dr. Rebecca Stotzer noted, communication is critical and messaging across multiple channels a necessity in online settings. Finally, teaching in an asynchronous condensed setting fundamentally impacts pedagogy. Instructors had to radically alter the delivery of course content using a variety of resources to support a larger educational narrative. Rather than worrying exclusively about what is being covered, instructors had to pay special attention to how material was being covered. Asynchronous online students need things to do, and faculty cannot depend on didactic methods and classroom dialogue. Interestingly, as instructors learned to create “experiences” for online students, they found them useful for their brick-and-mortar classes, thus enriching both the campus-based and online curricula.

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References