

Toward a Guide to Distance Education in Social Work

Contributed by Marshall L. Smith, PhD

This column will begin to explore some strategies for finding and identifying distance education (DE) options in social work. I have discussed the issues around DE in this column in the past, so I will not address them now. I'm sure I will need to revisit these issues from time to time in the future. But for now, let's just consider the question of how to find DE courses and programs in social work.

What is available via distance education in social work?

Unfortunately, at this point, there is no easy, "one-stop" way to determine what is available via distance education in social work. For example, if you Google for "distance education" and "social work," you will probably receive results that will include 50% or higher links to social work education in other countries (usually Canada, but increasingly Australia and others). The other 50% will probably be for programs in the United States. It is important to pay close attention to where your DE course or degree program originates, since future employers may be concerned about whether it is accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) or not.

Of course, Googling for possible professional education may not be the best way to proceed. You can go to CSWE's Web site (<http://www.cswe.org/CSWE/accreditation/>) and attempt a search of the latest Directory of Accredited Social Work Education Programs for "distance education" or even "online," but you will not receive any useful results, because this directory only contains contact information for each accredited program. At least, however, it is the best authoritative source for whether a program is accredited or in the process of applying for accreditation (i.e., "in candidacy").

To search for any particular program's information about whether it offers distance education or not, go to the two files I maintain, which contain all of the latest URLs for both BSW and MSW programs:

<http://www2.hawaii.edu/~smithml/bsw.htm>
<http://www2.hawaii.edu/~smithml/msw.htm>

But, this is still not helpful in efficiently tracking down up-to-date qualitative information on the kinds of courses, concentrations, and specializations offered by each social work education program and whether distance education is used to deliver courses and/or entire degree programs. CSWE used to publish a separate directory of graduate (MSW) programs that contained details like this on each school, but apparently this publication has not been updated since 2004.

I have begun to develop a WIKI, which I hope to be able to announce soon. It will permit existing accredited social work education programs to post their own information on their distance education offerings. Perhaps I will be able to discuss it in my next column in a few months.

Having said the above, I want also to say that what is available via distance education in social work is growing almost daily. I would like to be able to list some of the more obvious colleges and universities that currently offer social work education via distance education, but I am sure to omit someone in such a list. To be fair to all who are clamoring to compete in this arena, I will not attempt to publish the list for now, but hope to be able to do so soon. Just know that if you are persistent in your search, you will be rewarded with many options.

One last comment about what is available via distance education. Do not just search for "online" courses or programs. This will limit you to Internet-delivered education. Distance education opportunities exist via interactive television, polycom conferencing, even telephone-delivered content. In addition, there are courses that rely on written materials that are mailed using the U.S. Postal Service on a regular basis (the old "tried and true" correspondence course). Remember, it is important to seek a modality with which you are comfortable, as well as to insure that the course/program is accredited by CSWE.

What are the advantages and disadvantages of distance education?

There is much controversy over the delivery of social work education via distance education. People will question, "How can you learn to relate to people and help them if you are not interacting with them face-to-face?" First, this question fails to understand that while some content is delivered in a DE format, the application of the acquired knowledge is usually practiced face-to-face, and always under the supervision of an approved social worker who serves as your supervisor and mentor. Sometimes, this mentoring/supervision may take place over teleconferencing or interactive TV, but it usually involves being assigned to a social service agency where you will perform your work face-to-face and receive supervision in the same manner.

Much of your coursework may take place via interactions over the Internet (online) or using interactive TV (onscreen), in which you may initially feel uncomfortable, but will probably develop increasing professional skills at interaction, relationship building, assessment, helping, and so forth. The best example I can give here is that, for 30 years, I taught in the social work program at the Rochester Institute of Technology, where the National Technical Institute for the Deaf is located. In every class I taught, about half the students enrolled were deaf or hard-of-hearing. I witnessed incredibly sensitive skill levels of my deaf students just in their e-mail communications. When asked to participate in online chats or threaded discussions, deaf social work students often would outshine hearing students, because they have had so much more opportunity to use these media for serious day-to-day communication. I always said to my hearing students, "If your deaf colleagues can develop relationships and deliver real helping interventions relying on text messaging, then hearing professionals have a lot more they can learn about the helping process using the same media."

In short, I am saying that distance education is not for every student. Some will find it inappropriate for maximizing their

learning, but others will thrive on it and find new ways to teach the rest of us about this new frontier.

Is this program/course legitimate?

I have already mentioned the Directory of Accredited Social Work Education Programs, available from the CSWE Web site, but I did not mention that this is the best way to know if a particular social work school is legitimate. There are some higher education programs that call themselves "social work," which is legal—but programs are not permitted to label themselves "accredited social work education" unless they have gone through the rigorous process overseen by CSWE. If you want to know whether a particular program is accredited or not, do a search of its Web site for either the "Council on Social Work Education" or "CSWE." If this does not show up in either its Web site or in its published materials, ask the admissions office. If the program is unable to confirm that it is accredited by CSWE, continue your search.

Recently, there have been some "for-profit" institutions that want to offer social work degrees and have either inquired about becoming accredited or have begun the process. But, to date, as far as I know (search the CSWE directory!), no commercial education institutions have achieved accredited social work status.

What are the implications of taking non-accredited social work courses/programs?

Why am I cautioning current and potential social work students to be so careful of insuring their courses/programs are CSWE-accredited? You may, in fact, attend a non-accredited program and receive a similar education in some respects, but there is no guarantee. Let the buyer beware! Unaccredited social work education may even be taught by social workers, and they probably have a lot to offer as teachers. But when graduates seek employment, often employers will want to know that your degree is from a CSWE-accredited university or college. For one reason, employers often seek professional social workers for staff positions because they can receive reimbursement for services provided by these staff from third-party payers (i.e., insurance companies, government, and health maintenance organizations). Staff with unaccredited degrees may have similar skills, but are usually not approved for such reimbursement to agencies.

In addition, every state finally has either professional certification or licensing legislation in place for social workers. Increasingly, this legislation requires the social worker who holds such authorization to possess a professional degree from a CSWE-accredited institution.

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