Social Justice Through the Education of a Rural and Tribal Child Welfare Workforce

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The state of California has developed an infrastructure to address the workforce development needs of public human service agencies via the Title IV-E Social Work Training program. However, a recent analysis of student retention data indicates that the current infrastructure is not adequately addressing workforce needs for the rural and remote areas of the state. This article reports on a study conducted with county, tribal, community college, and staff stakeholders to explore rural workforce needs and possible solutions. Through the needs-assessment process, a collaborative pilot project using a blended learning model has been designed and initiated. Implications for the dual goals of improving rural workforce development and addressing the core social work value, social justice, through education are discussed.

KEYWORDS   distance education, rural child welfare, social justice, social work education, tribal child welfare

Professional staffing of public human services has long been a concern of workers, administrators, and academics (Leighninger, 2002; Zlotnik, Strand, & Anderson, 2009), yet time and resources continue to be limitations for agencies and staff. Rural agencies, which are typically smaller than their urban counterparts, have difficulties recruiting and retaining professionally trained workers coming from urban-based schools. Furthermore, these agencies have even less ability to support existing staff in the pursuit of formal ed-

ucation due to limited local resources and the distance to existing educational programs. However, current mandates from state and federal government make the improvement of public human service staffing a requirement.

California has developed an infrastructure to address a portion of the workforce development needs of public human service agencies via the Title IVE Social Work Training program of the California Social Work Education Center (CalSWEC) by providing a specialized MSW/BASW education in child welfare as well as financial assistance. While the existing program has increased the professional staffing in public child welfare, efforts are still needed to support workforce development in the state's rural areas. This article describes a recent study conducted in order to explore the workforce development needs of California' rural and remote areas as well as the initiation of a collaborative pilot project whose goals include providing a ladder of learning for improving the recruitment, and retention of rural workers, as well as using education as a vehicle for social justice.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The fundamental questions of this study aimed to develop a better understanding of how the educational needs of California's rural child welfare agencies might be improved. Thus, the key areas of interest related to this study are social work practice in rural areas, the use of distance education strategies for social work education, and the social justice value in social work education.

Rural Social Work

Rural social work is oftentimes described as different from social work practiced in urban areas. Recent research on realistic job previews indicates a value in educating potential workers on the uniqueness of rural settings (Faller et al., 2009). Setting differences that affect practice include a slower pace (for living and for change), use of informal helping networks, and a lack of resources (Riebschleger, 2007; Saltman et al., 2004). Reported job and practice differences include greater autonomy, greater decision-making authority, and greater agency support and teamwork in rural settings (Gellis, Kim, & Hwang, 2004; Landsman, 2002; Westbrook, Ellis, & Ellett, 2006).

Little has been written about recruitment, and retention of rural social workers. Riebschleger (2007) suggests that the lack of privacy in rural settings causes some workers to leave. Keeping personal and professional lives separate, which is stressed in most social work programs, may be more of a challenge in small, rural communities. Additionally, isolation (geographical and professional) is seen as a reason for turnover in rural settings (Riebschleger, 2007; Templeman & Mitchell, 2002).

One study surveying rural social workers indicated only 27.5% of respondents were native to the rural setting in which they worked, but 63% indicated they had grown up in a rural area (Saltman et al., 2004). An Australian-based study highlights the stresses of relocation and adjusting to rural life as factors in turnover (Lonne & Cheers, 2004). Similar stresses may also be applicable to rural settings in the United States. These studies raise the possibility that future recruitment efforts may improve retention if focused on those individuals already living in rural areas. Additionally, the increasing availability of distance education strategies improves opportunities for building a professional staff from rural areas.

New Strategies for Social Work Education

The use of distance education technologies and strategies in the provision of social work education is a topic that has gained much interest since the mid-1990s. Furthermore, it appears that schools of social work are embracing the shift in higher education toward adapting new technologies and avenues for reaching students. The 2009 Annual Program Meeting for the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) hosted 27 presentations related to technology and distance learning. A nationwide survey conducted by CSWE found that 41% of BASW programs and 52% of MSW programs (137 schools reporting) are currently delivering distance education courses, while another 20% of BASW programs and 31% of MSW programs are developing or exploring the possibility of providing courses with distance education technologies (Vernon et al., 2009). Currently, three states have schools that provide their full MSW program online: Florida, North Dakota, and Texas (Noble et al., 2007). Ayala (2009) suggests that a new educational paradigm has evolved called *blended learning*, which social work education should embrace for its potential to address changing student needs and environment. *Blended learning* is the integration of face-to-face with distance education methods.

Evaluations comparing distance education courses with traditional classroom courses indicate that student achievement is equivalent (Kleinpeter, 2005; Potts, 2005). Student satisfaction with methodologies is mixed, with some studies indicating a preference for traditional methods, some indicating no difference, and other studies indicating a preference for distance education methods (Kleinpeter, 2005; Macy et al., 2001). Student dissatisfaction with distance education courses is often tied to technological problems. Conversely, students are still able to reflect an appreciation for the educational opportunity that distance education courses offers them (Crowell & McCarragher, 2007; Potts, 2005).

Although acceptance and incorporation of distance education into social work programs has increased, opinions regarding the future are still mixed (Macy et al., 2001; Maidment, 2005; Moore, 2005). A common concern among

those opposed to distance education is the potential loss of face-to-face interaction (Kleinpeter, 2003; Petrachhi, 2003). Connected to this concern is a critique of the quality of distance education as compared to the quality of traditional classroom education (Macy et al., 2001). Some criticize the transfer, or ''dumping'' of traditional curriculum into a distance education format without exploring how to best enhance or adapt curricula to new formats (Maidment, 2005; Moore, 2005). Ayala (2009) suggests that evaluation of distance education by comparing it to traditional programs is not an effective way to truly assess the value and validity of programs which include distance education methodologies.

Social Justice in Social Work Education

The social work profession has been built upon several core values (NASW, 1999). One key ''organizing'' value is social justice (Marsh, 2005). The content of social work education should be a tool for increasing social justice (Tesoriero & Rajaratnam, 2001). The Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards put forth by the CSWE (2008) states that ''social work's purpose is actualized through its quest for social and economic justice, the prevention of conditions that limit human rights, the elimination of poverty, and the enhancement of the quality of life for all persons'' (p. 1). Research literature explores how social justice is addressed and incorporated into course syllabi, field practice, and research (Berg-Weger et al., 2004; Conrad, 1988; Hong & Hodge, 2009).

Through the social justice value, social work attempts to address barriers to resources, services, and quality of life (Tesoriero & Rajaratnam, 2001). There are many barriers to higher education for those living in rural communities (Alston, 2007). Those in favor of distance education point to its significance in supporting the social work values of social justice and equality (Abels, 2005; McFall & Freddolino, 2000). Students who access distance education courses are frequently non-traditional students, living in rural areas, who otherwise would not be able to further their education (Kleinpeter & Oliver, 2003). The exploration and implementation of distance education methodologies within social work programs has been driven by the need to reach rural communities and guarantee social work's ability to provide effective services regardless of location or population (Abels, 2005; Haga & Heitkamp, 2000). Increasing resource access, including education, to underserved populations fulfills social work's mission (Vernon et al., 2009). By improving education access, distance education also provides a unique opportunity to build community and increase collaboration for students who may be geographically isolated or otherwise marginalized (Maidment, 2005).

Social justice is not only core to the foundation on which the social work profession was built but should act as a guide for new and innovative

efforts (Marsh, 2005). With distance education, we not only promote social justice by educating students to incorporate it into their practice and research (Berg-Weger et al., 2004), but also through the delivery of education itself.

This project promotes the idea of social work education as the social justice action. It demonstrates that schools of social work, and the administrators and faculty within, can serve as direct agents of social change by working within the larger community to fill an educational need. Additionally, social work faculty reaching out to rural communities can act as advocates for these communities by helping prospective students navigate the educational institutions. The increased access to social work education or any education to underserved populations increases social justice in targeted communities by improving the economic status of its community members. This increased social justice is core to the profession's mission and values (NASW, 1999). Further, a central component of this study is to better understand how social work education can be a strategy/method to promote social justice in rural communities.

PURPOSE OF STUDY

Over the past decade, California has seen growth in the use of distance education in social work programs. However, existing programs have primarily served the regions immediately surrounding the host campus. Given the geographical limitations of the remote regions of the state, social work programs have had limited success in reaching the regions that do not have state university campuses. This finding is supported by CalSWEC's annual analysis of graduate retention data. Over the past 15 years, the number of counties in which MSW graduates have been employed has increased from 67% to 86% (California Social Work Education Center, 2000–2009). Despite these gains, however, it was found that the areas that did not have MSW graduates were consistently the same over time and were the most rural and remote areas of the state.

This data prompted interest from county social service directors for a study of workforce development needs and issues in the rural and remote regions of California. The mobilizing concepts were: (a) that rural counties face markedly more challenges in recruiting, and retaining a quality workforce than their large urban counterparts, and (b) that distance education strategies might offer an opportunity to address the educational needs of human service agency staff in rural and remote areas.

In an effort to understand the workforce development issues of rural and remote counties it was determined that in-person contact with the human service agencies was necessary to gather the kind of information needed to more fully address the issues. Those working and leading rural county agencies would know best what workforce problems they experience and

what solutions have the best chance of succeeding. As a result, the authors embarked on a study that involved surveys and focus groups with the leaders of the small, rural and remote counties. This initial phase of the study was intended to gather data that would identify the needs, issues and barriers as well as potential solutions to the counties' workforce problems.

As the study progressed, three pilot sites were selected to conduct a more in-depth needs assessment using standardized instruments. This phase involved structured interviews and surveys. From this secondary data-gathering phase, another purpose emerged that identified the need to educate those who are residents of the area rather than recruit educated staff from other regions of the state. This "grow your own" strategy acknowledges the need to educate those who have connections to their community and by extension the need for an investment in improving the lives of those in their community. This strategy led the authors to identify social justice as a secondary purpose of this study. Specifically, the act of making the education accessible to these regions is an act of social justice that has the potential to create social change in these regions.

METHOD

This project involved a two-part needs assessment process. In Phase 1, the goal was to ascertain whether counties saw a need for workforce development. Phase 2 was implemented to determine agency and community college ability to partner and deliver a program to improve workforce development. Additionally, the second phase was intended to determine interest among county and tribal workers for education services.

During Phase 1 of the project, the authors conducted research targeting the state's small and most remote counties to explore the current challenges and needs of these counties as well as ascertain visions for how to improve the educational opportunities for child welfare workers in rural counties. Focus groups were held with county leadership participating that are part of the "20 Small" consortium of counties in California. In addition to participation in the focus groups, counties were asked to complete a brief survey describing their current workforce (number of positions, education level, vacancy rates, and turnover rates).

In Phase 2, three state university campuses that are in proximity to many of California's rural counties were identified as pilot sites. They embarked on a needs-assessment process that included interviews and surveys with community colleges, county and tribal leadership, and potential students for the program. The goal was to ascertain partnership capacity on the part of the agencies, the tribes, and community colleges, as well as interest levels among the potential students. Additionally, throughout Phase 2, bimonthly conference calls with pilot site staff were held to refine the project purpose

and goals, the instruments, the program design and its implementation. Using this formative and developmental process ensured fidelity to the model to allow for comparison across sites.

FINDINGS

The research findings from the two phases of data collection are subsequently presented. First results from the workforce surveys will be described, followed by a compilation of results from the focus groups, subsequent surveys, and interviews. The compiled results consist of survey data from 19 counties, eight community colleges, and six tribal social service agencies and are taken from reports written by the three sites.

Phase 1

County leadership from California's "20 Small" counties contributed the data for Phase 1 of the study by completing brief surveys and participating in focus groups. The focus of Phase 1 was to gather direct feedback regarding workforce needs and possible solutions.

WORKFORCE SURVEY RESULTS

Of the 20 small counties surveyed, 13 responded to the workforce survey. Total staff size for participating counties ranged from 6.5–30 staff members. The number of social workers in each county ranged from 4.5–18 social workers. The staff education level varied among and within counties. Three counties reported having staff with less than an associate's degree. Five counties reported a range in education level from associate's degrees to master's degrees. Four counties reported a range of bachelor's degrees to master's degrees, whereas another two reported a range in education level of associate's degrees to bachelor's degrees. Two counties did not clarify education level of current staff.

The average vacancy rate was 16%, with a high rate of 33% and a low of 0% (only one county reporting zero vacancies). Counties described experiences with not being fully staffed for years and with taking 12 months to fill open positions. The turnover rate was described as high by several counties, with percentages running from 6% to 62%.

FOCUS GROUP RESULTS

Although each county is unique, the focus groups did illuminate several common themes or issues. The first theme that emerged was the *current workforce needs*, which included two subthemes: recruitment and retention. *Recruitment* issues included recognition of chronic vacancies as well as

struggling with lengthy hiring processes. Some respondents voiced a concern about the quality of staff that they were able to select from, specifically indicating that in some instances social workers hired that had higher degrees lacked specific and direct knowledge and skills of child welfare. Several counties also noted that the pool of potential hires was limited and more efforts must be put in to local recruitment as well as recruiting from social work programs.

In regards to *retention*, an inability to be competitive with neighboring counties was indicated by many. Additionally, respondents also reported losing staff to other departments within their own counties such as probation and mental health. Also related to retention, a few counties highlighted the lack of transition time for new staff, indicating that the risk of burnout was increased for staff members who start the job with a full caseload, before having the opportunity to attend core training. Most counties indicated that retention was tied to recruiting people who are drawn to live in a rural region, had some career/financial opportunity within the county and access to educational opportunities.

The second theme that emerged was the *need for more education* of current staff. Most respondents indicated that they thought their staff needed more education. When asked why, most respondents indicated that social work theory and content was a necessary component to improving practice and by extension service to children and families. Two "no" responses were due to already requiring bachelor's degrees for all direct service staff and an ability to be very selective in hiring.

The third theme that emerged was the *current barriers to educating staff*. Barriers of time and distance for staff were mentioned by all counties. Most counties report a 1.5–3-hour drive for staff to reach the closest campuses. For some counties, mountain ranges and single highways further impact travel time and accessibility. Inability to do internships in their home county was mentioned as a barrier in two focus groups. In addition to the issue of distance, a lack of resources such as money and staff (for backfill) were mentioned by all as barriers to counties supporting staff education.

The fourth theme that emerged was the identification of *effective methods for accessing education*. Most counties recommended a multipronged approach for education, introducing or increasing the availability of online classes but maintaining an in-person component. Several respondents indicated a belief that classroom methods are the most effective but also most time intensive and most difficult to coordinate. However, the interest in online coursework was not consistent across all counties. Rather there appears to be a continuum of interest or desire in the amount of distance education strategies versus the amount of traditional classroom (preferably in house or at least in town) offerings. In addition, being able to offer release time and provide back-up workers were mentioned as means for improving staff ability to access further education.

Phase 2

During Phase 2 of the study, pilot sites at three state university campuses were identified based on their proximity to the "20 small" counties. The needs-assessment process was then conducted to gain a deeper understanding of how a distance education program could be constructed to meet the already identified needs of the counties. The findings presented here are from the employer-, employee-, and community-college perspective and are drawn from the reports from the three pilot sites.

EMPLOYER FINDINGS

All three sites confirmed the need for education for their employees, but differing reasons were given for the need. Some leaders noted that having a distance education program that supported "a career pathway and increased the skill level of staff" would benefit their agency, others noted that adopting a "growing your own" strategy would promote "more of a commitment to the organization." Consistently noted from the counties was the need to develop a program that supported employees' access and attainment of an MSW degree. All reported that an associate's degree and, in some circumstances, a BASW offered little advantage to the employee other than making them more competitive for promotion. This finding led to a clearly articulated vision of a distance education program that supports a student wherever they are in their educational journey with the goal of moving them "up the ladder" from an associate's degree to BASW degree and, finally, attaining the MSW degree. Employers defined the type of support their agency could offer in two broad categories: student support and agency support. In the category of *student support*, agencies stated they could provide students with flex time to attend the program and field placement opportunities. Some noted that although release time is optimal this time would be challenging to implement due to staffing limitations. In the category of *agency support*, agencies noted that they were willing to provide access to space for classes, seminars, supervision, Internet access, and video conferencing facilities if needed.

In reviewing curriculum requirements for the program, county and tribal leaders expressed support for social work curriculum as specified in the 2008 CSWE educational policy and accreditation standards. The agency and tribal leaders articulated this as needing a focus on rural social work practice, working in a team environment, working with Native American cultures, motivational interviewing, and a broad range of communication skills, all of which are competencies addressed in the CSWE content. Finally, county and tribal leaders also identified a need to identify the specific skills level to be attributed to someone with an associate's degree, BASW degree, or MSW degree.

All counties noted multiple barriers to providing current employees with access to a program of this type. The first was the ability to hire or promote an employee once the degree was attained. Most counties noted that this ability would be difficult because of the budget limitations of a small county but also noted they would do everything possible to support the employee's career path. Also noted were the financial ability of the county or student to pay for the education as well the issue of traveling long distances. Additionally, technology was noted as a possible barrier because some counties may not have the technology needed to deliver the education with distance modalities. Finally, counties expressed that the personal characteristics of the student could sometimes be a barrier because the student would need to have the capacity to continue with the program in order to succeed.

EMPLOYEE FINDINGS

Employees of the counties and tribal social service regions indicated a strong interest in getting social work degrees. A range of 26% to 38% of all workers surveyed indicated that their immediate educational need was to get their high school degree, general equivalency degree, or associate's degree. Most staff reported their goal was to attain either a BASW or MSW degree. However, staff in Tribal Social Service agencies more often reported their goal was to attain the associate's degree. Finally, when employees were asked about accessing the education via a mixture of online and face-to-face instruction, an overwhelming majority of staff within all counties and tribal entities surveyed reported they were interested in this method of delivery.

The primary barriers noted by employees were lack of finances to pay for the education and a lack of release time from work to attend school. It was further noted that the education is not offered in a convenient place or at a convenient time, and travel time to and from class can be prohibitive. Finally, family responsibilities were also identified as a possible barrier to successful participation in an educational program.

COMMUNITY COLLEGE FINDINGS

The purpose of interviewing the community colleges within proximity of each of the pilot sites was to assess current technological capabilities as well as what courses, certificates, and degree programs were currently offered and whether they aligned with social work education requirements. Interviews also ascertained to what extent these institutions were willing to develop collaborative relationships with a common goal of providing social work educational programs to current county employees. All of the community colleges within proximity of the pilot sites either had an associate's degree that aligned with a BASW program or coursework that would provide students with a foundation to move into a BASW program.

Also important was the existing capacity for distance education already available at many community colleges. In fact, many of the colleges surveyed already had courses online and available to students. In general, community colleges were found to be more developed in this area than the pilot sites housed within the state universities. With regard to collaborative relationships, while many community colleges were interested in developing collaborations, they were equally concerned about retaining their student base as well as making sure it was financially viable for them to do so.

PROJECT OUTCOMES

With the completion of the needs assessment, the pilot sites were able to bring the data together via bimonthly conference calls, which enabled the development of a clear program model addressing the needs and barriers as discussed in the previous sections. Additionally, the bimonthly calls addressed the issues of model fidelity across sites for evaluation purposes.

The essential components of the program developed based on the study data were threefold: First, to offer social work education at the three rungs of the educational ladder: degrees at the associate's, BASW, and MSW levels. Second, to create a pathway that includes financial assistance through Title IV-E for the student to easily move up the rungs of the ladder. Third, to apply a wraparound educational model (Dennis & Lourie, 2006) for students to give them individualized support so that educational barriers can be addressed in a timely fashion.

After analyzing the findings from this study it was found that much of what the counties advocated for mirrored the "ladder-of-learning" concept adopted by California in the Master Plan for Social Work Education (California Social Work Education Center, 2004)—only adapted to meet the needs of rural child welfare agencies. This rural-based ladder-of-learning could enhance the state's current education and distance education infrastructure by incorporating previously untapped distance education technologies and strategies that expand educational opportunities to students at each level of the ladder while concurrently working in child welfare.

The ladder-of-learning is designed to address the recruitment and retention needs identified by the counties. Both the literature and focus group data indicate a need to recruit local workforce while at the same time providing increased access to educational opportunities for current workers. However, any attempt to create a ladder-of-learning would need to balance the often diverging needs of the workers and the counties. Worth noting as an example of this divergence is that employees associated the attainment of any higher education with advancement or promotion. Conversely, county data showed that this advancement or promotion would not necessarily be the outcome because of budget and hiring constraints.

IMPLICATIONS

A primary goal of this study was to explore the full range of workforce development needs of California's most rural and remote counties and how distance education technologies and strategies might address the identified needs. In delivering the program described in this article, a fundamental nexus of social work practice and social work education emerges. In this program, education becomes a social work action. The pilot sites assume the dual roles of educators and social work practitioners to improve student capacity to participate in the education. By design, social work practices were utilized throughout the needs assessment process and incorporated into the program structure. Educators in rural communities must employ social work practices in order to successfully improve the workforce of these communities.

Additionally, by design, input from the pilot sites and their stakeholders was sought to gain a fuller understanding of the need for education in the social service sectors. It was found that there was a profound need for education and that the actual provision of education might be a means of improving social justice. The program promotes social justice by providing the education and the necessary supports so that students can realistically access and complete their educations. In turn, the students become more a long-term community asset by achieving their educational goals, and overall the local population has attained higher education levels to support community development.

Finally, this program was initiated with a meta goal of improving outcomes for children and families in the child welfare system. Given that the county employees surveyed in this study were those working in child welfare or in Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), it is important to remember these employees are often charged with making highly sensitive decisions on behalf of children and families, some of which have life and death implications. By creating educational access and attainment, worker knowledge and skill will be improved, which in turn improves worker provision of services, resulting in better outcomes for children and families.

CONCLUSION

This article documents the development and implementation of a promising social work education delivery model that has the potential to improve the outcomes for child welfare clients through the educational development of the child welfare workforce. This project began as a study to assess how best to deliver social work education to small, rural, and remote counties. In the course of this study, it was found that in order to deliver education to these areas different delivery methods would need to be employed to accomplish

this goal and that local stakeholders were the best authorities on how to develop the program. This finding reinforces the notion that schools of social work can develop a fundamentally different role within their communities. In the course of this study it was found that the pilot schools developed a dual relationship—one of educator and the other as a community change agent with social justice and advocacy at its core. This dual relationship was achieved by aligning with the way in which the child welfare and tribal agency leaders and staff articulated their educational needs and goals. The pilot schools adapted ways in which the program could be delivered to meet those needs and goals. In other words, the delivery methods of the program had to be designed to meet the specific needs of the people in these remote and economically underserved regions of the state.

In this adaptation process, the pilot schools became better able to address the needs of the agencies and potential students by developing the capacity to hold the dual role of educator and social work practitioner/community change agent. The resulting program design incorporates advocacy as a central tool in order to address the economic barriers to education experienced by tribal and rural community members. This program, as designed, requires the school sites to develop the capacity to be both the educator and community change agent to meet the local educational needs.

If schools of social work hold this dual role, they can advance the NASW Code of Ethics Values and Ethical Principles of *Service* and *Social Justice.* Furthermore, embracing this dual role promotes the idea that schools of social work should actually *practice* social work to meet the educational mandates of the university, CSWE and, most importantly, to help in ameliorating the conditions that social workers seek to change. The project findings thus far reflect the need to address recruitment and retention at all levels of education and the need for specialized educational pathways and supports to meet the unique needs of child welfare staff in rural settings. The authors hope that this project also shows how social work education itself can become a vehicle for social justice and that social work faculty can act as advocates for social change.

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