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Compressed Social Work Education: An Innovative Approach to Continuing Education

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How can working professionals, many of whom have an undergraduate degree in social work, most effectively attain a quality MSW education—and thereby increase their competence as social work practitioners? Many of such professionals have high undergraduate student loans, and many also have family obligations. For them to quit their jobs to attend a traditional full-time or part-time social work program is often not feasible.

For the past few decades, MSW programs have been exploring innovative approaches that would help working professionals with an undergraduate education attain a quality MSW education. Generally, the approach has involved part-time enrollment. Considerable research indicates students graduating from a part-time program learn as much as students graduating from a full-time program (Callicut, et al.; Porter, 1985; National Committee on Part-Time Social Work Education, 1985; Hawthorne, 1985; Starr and Walker, 1982; Council on Social Work Education Annual Program Meeting, 1987; Gullerud, E. et al., 1983; Nooe & Fauri, 1979; Seltzer, M. M., et al., 1986; Smith, J. D. and Kolevzon, 1987; Valentine, D. P., et al., 1986; Tully and Boley, 1987).

An innovative approach to part-time MSW education is the compressed education format that has been developed at George Williams College of Aurora University. This approach will be the focus of this paper. The approach will be described and the results of an evaluative study of the students enrolled in the program will be summarized.

The MSW program at George Williams College (GWC) is a satellite program of Aurora University, which has a CSWE-accredited baccalaureate program and a CSWE-accredited MSW program. Aurora University is located in a suburb of Chicago, and George Williams

College is located near the Wisconsin-Illinois border, about 75 miles north of Aurora University. The MSW program at George Williams College was primarily designed to provide a quality MSW education to social workers with full-time jobs who held a baccalaureate degree in social work, and to working professionals with a baccalaureate degree in a field other than social work.

The MSW program at Aurora University has the traditional approach to scheduling -- fall and spring semesters that each run for 16 weeks. Some courses are also offered between semesters, and during the summer.

The compressed format at George Williams College involves offering the same courses at this satellite campus as are offered at Aurora University, but in a compressed format. The compressed format has the following structure. Essentially, there are three terms: fall, spring, and summer. Within each of these three terms students take two courses each. However, the courses are taken consecutively, rather than concurrently, meaning that students are taking only one course at a time. The first course in a term is offered over a seven-week period. Classes are held Friday evening from 6:30 p.m. to 9:50 p.m. and on Saturday morning from 8:30 a.m. to 11:50 a.m. Students attend for three weekends in a row, have a one-week break, and then attend for another three weekends. The second course starts one week after the first one ends. Students attend for the first three weekends, take a one week break, and then attend for three more weekends. There are a couple of weeks of “vacation” for the students between each of the fall, spring, and summer terms.

The satellite classes at George Williams College are taught by two full-time faculty members, by faculty who travel to the campus

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from Aurora University, and by adjunct MSW instructors from the surrounding community. The two full-time faculty members attend faculty meetings at Aurora University and some faculty meetings are held at George Williams College. In addition, there are topic curriculum committees that meet frequently to develop the syllabus for each course, and to ensure that similar content is taught in the courses that are offered at each campus.

Two concentrations are offered at both campuses: (a) clinical social work and (b) community leadership.

The advanced standing program at George Williams College takes about 18 months to complete. To receive advanced standing, students must have attained a baccalaureate degree from a CSWEE-accredited program within the past five years. Table 1 identifies the required courses in this advanced standing program.

Students who are not admitted into the advanced standing program are required to enroll in the three-year, 60-credit hour program. Table 2 identifies the required courses in this program.

The structure and format of the internships are as follows:

The internship process at GWC involves either one or two placements, depending on which track the student is following – traditional or advanced standing. Students work with the field coordinator to obtain a placement. In order to conform to established standards agencies are required to have an affiliation with the college. These affiliations must provide MSW supervision in accordance with CSWE guidelines.

The first or beginning internship consists of a 450-hour placement and extends over two semesters. This placement is something of a macro internship where students learn about the multiple processes involved in social work,

and generally they have some direct client contact.

**Table 1. Advanced Standing Program
33 Total Credits**

Year 1 (Total credits: 15)

Fall Semester (3 credits)

SWK 6500 *Social Work Perspectives on Psychopathology (3 credits)*

Spring Semester (6 credits)

SWK xxxx *Social Work Elective (3 credits)*
SWK xxxx *Social Work Elective (3 credits)*

Summer Session (6 credits)

SWK 6511/12 *SWK Practice III Concentration (3 credits)*
SWK xxxx *Social Work Elective (3 credits)*

Year 2 (Total credits: 18)

Fall Semester (9 credits)

SWK 6522 *SWK Practice IV- Concentration (3 credits)*

SWK 6281/82 *Research II (3 credits)*

SWK 6750 *Field III: Advanced Internship (3 credits)*

Spring Semester (6 credits)

SWK 6532/33 *Advanced Social Policy- Concentration (3 credits)*

SWK xxxx *Social Work Elective (3 credits)*

SWK 3760 *Field IV: Advanced Internship (3 credits)*

The level of expertise will vary among students, but all will have had the foundation curriculum prior to starting the internship. Integration of HBSE I and II, cross-cultural, and policy concepts is incorporated into this

placement. Students have a fair amount of autonomy in choosing their internship, but they work with the coordinator to determine goodness of fit.

**Table 2. Three - Year MSW Program
60 Total Credits**

Year 1 (18 Total Credits)

Fall Semester (6 credits)
 SWK 6150 *HBSE I: Ecological Perspective (3 credits)*
 SWK 6140 *Social Welfare History, Policy, & Institutions (3 credits)*

Spring Semester (6 credits)
 SWK 6160 *HBSE II: Theories of Human Development (3 credits)*
 SWK 6390 *Cross-Cultural SWK Practice (3 credits)*

Summer Session (6 credits)
 SWK 6370 *SWK Practice I: Individuals and Families (3 credits)*
 SWK 6250 *Research I: Methodology (3 credits)*

Year 2 (24 Total Credits)

Fall Semester (9 credits)
 SWK 6381 *SWK Practice II: Groupwork (1.5 credits)*
 SWK 6382 *SWK Practice II: Community (1.5 credits)*
 SWK 6500 *SWK Perspectives: Psychopathology (3 credits)*
 SWK 6730 *Field I: Beginning Internship (3 credits)*

Spring Semester (9 credits)
 SWK xxxx *Social Work Elective (3 credits)*

SWK xxxx *Social Work Elective (3 credits)*
 SWK 6740 *Field II: Beginning Internship (3 credits)*

Summer Session (6 credits)
 SWK 6511/12 *Practice III-Concentration (3 credits)*
 SWK xxxx *Social Work Elective (3 credits)*

Year 3 (18 Total Credits)

Fall Semester (9 credits)
 SWK 6521/22 *SWK Practice IV-Concentration (3 credits)*
 SWK 6281/82 *Research II: Project (3 credits)*
 SWK 6750 *Field III: Advanced Internship (3 credits)*

Spring Semester (9 credits)
 SWK 6531/32 *Advanced Social Policy-Concentration (3 credits)*
 SWK xxxx *Social Work Elective (3 credits)*
 SWK 6760 *Field IV: Advanced Internship (3 credits)*

The second or advanced internship consists of a 600-hour placement extending over two semesters. Students are placed in an area that is of interest to them, and might be either clinically or community based. Students are able to hone skills and integrate theoretical concepts that are expected at the advanced level. This placement offers a variety of opportunities that give students a knowledge base in the area of expertise where they expect to practice. Financial aid is available to students who qualify at both GWC and Aurora University.

Students are expected to be at their internship five to six hours per day, two to three days a week, depending on the agency and the type of placement. A learning agreement is prepared by the student and his or her field instructor by the fifth week of their placement, and evaluations of the student's performance is completed each semester, reflecting the level of competency in specific areas. At least one field visit per semester is made by either a liaison or the coordinator, and others visits are scheduled as needed. All students complete a form evaluating the field experience at the completion of their internship.

In December 2006 an evaluative survey, developed by the two authors of this article, was administered to the three cohort groups at GWC. Each cohort takes one class at a time. The authors went to each of the three classes and distributed a copy of the survey. After receiving permission from the professors of these classes, students completed the survey during their class period. They were specifically instructed not to sign their names in order to maintain anonymity, which is required in a study such as this. It was also felt that students' responses would reflect a greater degree of comfort and therefore honesty if the survey was anonymous. The classes were divided according to the specific cohort group. The cohort group of 2004 and 2005 included several advanced standing students.

The findings of the survey are summarized as follows:

Students were asked to rate, on a scale of (1—poor) to (10—superb), their view of the overall quality of the MSW education they were receiving at GWC. The median score was 9, which indicates most students stated they believe the quality of their MSW education is high.

Students were asked what number, on a scale of (1—easy) to (10—extremely difficult), best represents their view of the degree of difficulty of working at a job, doing field placement, and attending this MSW program. The median score was 9, which indicates students view this challenge as being quite difficult. Practically all of these students also have family responsibilities, which presents an additional challenge with having to incorporate family life into their work and school schedules.

Students were asked which of the following educational formats they prefer to attend: (a) semester term, or (b) compressed format. Forty-three stated they prefer the compressed format, and only one stated he or she prefers the semester term. This result indicates that virtually all these students prefer the compressed format over the traditional semester term.

The students indicated they see a number of advantages to the compressed format. The following are illustrations:

"I work better in a fast paced environment. I tend to be a procrastinator and this program does not allow me time to procrastinate."

"By far, the compressed format is most preferred. It allows for short breaks, which are needed—allows for a consistent schedule for the full three years. Much like a summer school course, it allows for increased retention and applicability. Adult learners need this format."

"I like to take one class at a time—to concentrate fully in that class. The Friday night/Saturday morning format suits my family's lifestyle. I don't want to be away from kids on weeknights."

“It works for an adult returning to school while working full-time. It keeps me interested the whole time in subject matter.”

“You can totally concentrate on one subject for the six weeks and then move on to the next.”

“It allows me to work full-time and complete the program in a timely fashion. The schedule allows for more in-depth conversations and activities in class.”

In summary, the advantages to the compressed format include the following: It is a fast-paced environment, which reduces the time to procrastinate; students take one class at a time, which facilitates their attending to the course content; and it allows students to work full time, while attaining an MSW in a timely fashion.

Students were asked their thoughts on the advantages of being a member of a cohort group in which they take all their classes with the same group of students. Every student listed two or more advantages. The following are illustrative of the responses that were received:

“You begin to grow close to other students. Everyone is going through the same or similar situations. It is like having a support group.”

“You get to know students on a more personal level. It creates availability for a close-knit support group among students, which helps to relieve stress and contributes to study groups.”

“You have a chance to really get to know your classmates.”

“Classmates seem to feel comfortable with one another and know what to expect from peers.”

“Closeness of classmates; easier to express opinions; building a network for future professional usage.”

“Feel comfortable among peers to share stories/experiences. Start out with class members who you know you will be with them in the next class; makes it easier to start off the bat.”

“We get to know each other well and get to work together. We get very involved and share detailed information on each other’s jobs and experiences that we can constantly relate to the material in class.”

“I have a deep appreciation of the cohort approach. The advantages are getting to really know your group, learning to work as a team, and developing a sense of belonging and concern for others.”

These statements indicate that for most students their cohort group has become a “support group” that can help one another problem solve their personal challenges; assists them in learning to work together as a team; and facilitates the formation of study groups.

The students listed the following as being a disadvantage of being in a cohort group:

“Somewhat difficult coming in as advanced standing as far as feeling part of the cohort. I anticipate this to improve.”

“Occasionally cliquy; occasional personality differences.”

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“Certain students love drama and create tension within the cohort. It seems that those individuals do not stay in the cohort, maybe due to personal reasons.”

“May limit variety as far as student perspectives.”

“You can’t get away from the annoying ones.”

“You are stuck with the same people. There might be someone you might have trouble getting along with.”

“The main disadvantage would be the lack of incorporating new people and ideas into the classroom.”

It should be noted that the number of disadvantages that were listed were less than half of the number of advantages that were listed. This suggests students generally perceive considerable merit in having a cohort group in an MSW program. The disadvantages that were listed suggest concerns over the following: the formation of cliques; having to continue to take classes with someone who is “annoying”; the danger of limiting variety in regards to student perspectives; and the challenges that advanced standing students face when joining a cohort group that has previously been established with traditional students.

Most of the students are working full-time, or part-time, in social work, or social work-related jobs. Practically all of the students indicated taking MSW classes has assisted them in performing better at their job. The following responses are illustrative of how the MSW courses are assisting them in their jobs:

“The courses have been beneficial in me performing better at my job because I am gaining new information on how to assist my clients and better understand them and also how I can go about making policy challenges that I feel need to be reviewed.”

“It gives both macro and micro perspectives related to my job. It helps to teach coworkers and subordinates the topics we discuss in class and in readings.”

“It has helped me with general knowledge related to my families; increased ability to work with staff and families.”

“I look at each situation I encounter with a different perspective.”

“Better understanding of diagnosis of clients; better crisis management skills; better overall leadership skills.”

“Psychopathology has helped give a perspective on working with mentally ill clients. Enhanced my awareness of macro social work practices, which directly affects clients. Theory-especially the strengths perspective, helped me gain a better understanding of how to help clients reach their goals.”

“I can better work with people and understand their disorder from a clinical standpoint. I can share my hardships with others and get good advice from a social work standpoint.”

“Better understanding of clients; increased empathy to awareness of disorders.”

“It is easier to work with the mentally ill population by being able to identify symptoms

and know terms. As a professional, I know what to expect.”

These statements indicate the students are applying the material that they are learning in their courses to the work that they are currently doing in their social work or social work-related jobs. As a result, both their clients and their employers are probably directly benefiting, because these students are performing more effectively and efficiently. Both authors of this article instruct in this program, and it is their impression that teaching MSW students who hold a job in social work or in a related field enriches the classroom. These students frequently share and problem-solve in classes, based on their experiences with clients and other staff from their place of employment. This process facilitates the application of the theoretical concepts they are learning in the classroom.

The students overwhelmingly stated that there is enough time in a seven-week course to do all the course assignments, and to “comprehend” the material presented in lectures and in assigned readings.

Conclusion

Compressed MSW education involves offering courses in an intensive format, with the length of a course being substantially shorter than the traditional semester-long format. Compressed, part-time MSW education appears to be highly attractive to working professionals, many of whom have an undergraduate degree in social work. The compressed format allows them to pursue a quality MSW education while working full-time and attending to family responsibilities. The compressed MSW format at George Williams College of Aurora University is described. In addition, a survey of the students in this program found that they overwhelmingly prefer this format over the

traditional semester-long format. The students did indicate that working at a job, doing field placement, and taking “in class” courses is a difficult challenge. The students’ views on the advantages and disadvantages of this compressed format and being a member of a cohort group are summarized.

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