



**Distance and On-Campus MSW Students: How They Perform and What They Tell Us**

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# Distance and On-Campus MSW Students: How They Perform and What They Tell Us

*Agathi Glezakos, PhD, LCSW; Cheryl D. Lee, PhD, MSW*

## Introduction

Reported findings from a myriad of studies have not yet unequivocally defined the acceptance of distance education (DE) in the training of professional social workers. Studies have focused on the comparability between on-campus (OC) and DE programs. Numerous researchers compared courses taught over interactive television (ITV), which were augmented by face-to-face instruction (Kleinpeter & Potts, 2000; Ligon, Markwood, & Yegidis, 1997; McFall & Freddolino, 2000; Patchner, Petracchi, & Wise, 1998; Petracchi & Patchner, 2000; Thyer, Polk, Artelt, Markwood, & Dosier, 1998; Thyer & Polk, 1997).

An overview of these studies reveals the presence of two conflicting schools of thought. On one end of the spectrum stand a small group of researchers, who view professional social work education taught through DE programs with skepticism (Kreuger & Stretch, 2000; Thyer & Polk, 1997; Thyer et al., 1998). In contrast, the majority of researchers support the development of DE social work programs (Forster & Washington, 2000; Freddolino & Sutherland, 2000; Potts & Hagan, 2000; Siegel, Jennings, Conklin, & Napoletano, 1998). This latter group advocates that schools and departments of social work must take advantage of a technology that has revolutionized instruction in other disciplines, to help meet the need for professional education in rural and remote areas.

To elucidate these diverse perspectives, a comparability study of 100 MSW students (DE  $n=56$ ; OC  $n=44$ ) was undertaken to measure learning outcomes in the domains of knowledge, values, and skills. In addition, this research explored the ranking of required courses by the DE students to learn how they perceived the goodness of fit between their classes and a distance-learning format.

## Literature Review

The Open University of the United Kingdom, founded in 1971, became a model for DE programs around the world (Smith, 1988). For more than two decades, U.S. schools and departments of social work have been offering DE courses in continuing education and degree-based programs, to part-time and off-campus students (Jennings, Siegel, & Conklin, 1995; Thyer & Polk, 1997). DE is currently defined as a formal approach to teaching, in which the learner and the instructor are geographically separated. The interaction is facilitated through a technology medium, such as compressed video, satellite transmission, fiber optics, or computers (Blakely, 1992; Coe & Elliott, 1999; Forster & Washington, 2000; Verduin & Clark, 1991).

In 1994, the Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) Commission on Accreditation (COA) introduced standards of comparability, mandating that DE programs had to meet the specific accreditation requirements of the institution's main campus (Wilson, 1999). This requirement of comparability promoted the idea that face-to-face instruction is the norm against which DE courses are to be measured (Forster & Washington, 2000). It also established the agenda for numerous evaluative studies, whose results have been reported in the literature, comparing distance learners with traditional OC learners from multiple perspectives, yielding conflicting conclusions.

Thyer and Polk (1997) reported that DE ( $n=9$ ) and OC ( $n=11$ ) MSW students, who completed a required practice course taught simultaneously to two sections of students, and who experienced both types of instruction, rated live instruction significantly higher than distance learning. In a replication study of two other practice courses, with a

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larger size sample (DE  $n=27$ ; OC  $n=30$ ), it was again reported that, "live instruction was significantly evaluated more favorably than televised teaching" (Thyer et al., 1998, p. 294). In a conceptualized model for DE social work education, Blakely (1992) addressed the question of what courses fit into such a model. He concluded, "the foundation courses, which are more didactic and straightforward, would be easier to present, whereas the practice courses would be more complicated and demanding" (p. 218).

The analysis of data collected from a national survey of 259 accredited social work programs revealed, "the most frequently delivered distance learning courses for all respondents were reported as HBSE (51%), policy (46%), research (37%), and methods (24%). BSW programs primarily offered research, HBSE, and methods courses, while MSW programs most often offered policy courses and electives" (Siegel et al., 1998, p. 74). The authors attributed these program preferences to a probable bias of social work educators, who believe that practice courses "can only be introduced, conveyed, and reinforced through face-to-face learning" (p. 75).

From a curriculum offerings perspective, review of the literature reveals an impressive focus on the comparability of research and practice methods courses. At this time, no controversy appears to surround the inclusion of the noninteractional research courses in DE curricula. The place of the interactional practice courses, however, in DE curricula, continues to be debated.

Patchner et al. (1998) compared students enrolled in a foundations research methods course utilizing face-to-face instruction with students taking the course via ITV. They found that while, in both groups, students preferred face-to-face instruction, there were no statistically significant differences between the two groups "on the scores of the final examination, the written paper, the final course grade, on a research and statistics knowledge test or on scores of a scale measuring students' attitudes toward research" (p. 23).

Petracchi and Patchner (2000) studied three groups of students who received instruction in a research methods course. One group was in a classroom from which ITV broadcasts originated. Another group participated in the same section from a remote area. The third group enrolled in a different section with face-to-face instruction. Students in all three groups reported "very favorable and comparable experiences" (p. 335), and no significant differences were found among the groups. In a comparison study of identical courses taught to DE and OC students, Ligon et al. (1997) found that "students rated distance learning higher than the standard classroom for a course having predominantly lecture content. Conversely, ratings for clinical practice courses were just the opposite with lower ratings for distance learning than the standard classroom" (p. 2).

In an evaluation study which utilized a post-test-only design with a sample of DE ( $n=47$ ) and OC ( $n=30$ ) students, Coe and Elliott (1999) concluded, "Practice courses combining face-to-face and television instruction can be included in these types of alternative programs" (p. 364). Kleinpeter and Potts (2000) described the outcomes of two, first-year practice method courses from a comparison study between distance students and OC students on grades, faculty evaluations, and field instructors' evaluations. The authors concluded that their program's model of DE "provides learning outcomes that are equivalent to those provided in traditional classrooms. Even in the case of practice methods courses, it appears that teaching style can be adapted to meet the demands of this new technology" (p. 42).

Researchers have suggested that additional studies need to be undertaken to further measure learning outcomes (Forster & Washington, 2000; Siegel et al., 1998). There is no evidence in the reviewed literature that any study comparing DE and OC students has been conducted to measure acquisition of knowledge, adoption of social work values, and development of practice skills at the time of graduation, by administering an outcome assessment instrument.

Furthermore, there is no reference in the existing literature to studies addressing thesis courses as a DE curriculum offering. As a result, it is currently unknown how the thesis requirement impacts the learning experiences of MSW students in DE programs. This research study measured comparable student learning outcomes in knowledge, value, and skill acquisition using an assessment tool, and assessed DE students' comparative ranking of course offerings, including thesis courses.

### **The Program**

In the fall of 1998, California State University, Long Beach (CSULB), Department of Social Work, admitted students from four DE sites into the MSW program. These sites included: California State University, Bakersfield; California State University, Channel Islands; Chico State University; and Humboldt State University. The students were admitted to the Department's three-year, on-campus, part-time MSW program. All students, in both the four DE sites and the OC group, were in the program's Children, Youth and Families (CYF) concentration. Graduation for both cohorts, DE and OC, was slated for Spring 2001.

The four DE sites were linked in pairs, creating two simultaneous classes. The method of technology used was interactive television (ITV). Each distance campus had a classroom equipped with fiber optic technology that allowed for the simultaneous transmission of interactive, two-way video and audio communication. Faculty lectured from studios on the Long Beach campus, or from one of the off-campus sites. All sites were able to see and hear one another in real time, with presentations originating on any one of the four campuses.

The DE program staff consisted of a program coordinator/faculty advisor, a coordinator located at each of the four sites, and an administrative assistant. Instructors assigned to teach these courses were predominately from the host institution. Some instructors were based in the local communities of the four DE sites. The program incorporated multi-

ple methods of instruction, which included ITV, with varying numbers of site visits by faculty from the host campus, regular face-to-face instruction by faculty at the local universities, and periodic face-to-face instruction by the thesis chair from the host campus. Instruction by any of these methods also included communication with students via email, phone, fax, and mail.

Over a three-year period, DE and OC students were expected to complete a prescribed, 20-course curriculum. Of these 20 courses, 18 were required and two were elective courses. The group of required courses included: HBSE, policy, research, administration, community projects, practice methods, and field instruction. During the final year of the program, students were expected to complete their thesis requirement, the capstone of the MSW program.

### **Methods**

#### **Design**

A post-test-only design was used to compare variations in practice competencies between graduating DE and OC MSW students. In addition, one survey question was used to assess DE students' rankings of the required courses' appropriateness for DE instruction.

#### **Sample**

The sample consisted of 100 part-time Master of Social Work (MSW) graduating students (DE  $n=56$ ; OC  $n=44$ ), who were present on the penultimate session of their required, advanced social policy class. DE and OC students were compared on practice competencies. Of the possible 67 graduating DE students, 84% ( $n=56$ ) completed the survey. Of the possible 62 graduating OC students, 71% ( $n=44$ ) completed the survey.

#### **Instrument**

The three-page instrument consisted of three sections. The first section included a 25-item competence scale. The 25-item practice competence

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scale was created by the authors based on a review of the literature, sample questions from the social work licensing exam in California, the NASW Code of Ethics, and the authors' combined social work practice knowledge and teaching experience of over 25 years. In essence, the scale possesses content validity. Reliability of the scale was measured using Cronbach's Alpha (.71). The scale assessed values (8 items), knowledge (8 items), and skills (9 items). Answers were reported on a four-point, Likert-type scale, ranging from "1" = *strongly agree*, to "4" = *strongly disagree*. Examples of the items under each category are as follows: 1) Value—All social work clients must be treated with the same respect and dignity, regardless of their behavior; 2) Knowledge—According to state laws, social work clients must not be allowed access to their treatment records; and 3) Skill—A collaborative social worker-client relationship diminishes the level of the worker's competence.

The second section consisted of four demographic questions. These included: age, gender, years of social work experience, and current social work employment.

The third section asked DE students to rank nine required subject areas on a 9-point scale with "1" as the *most appropriate*, and "9" as the *least appropriate*. Some of the subject areas included, multiple courses taught over several semesters. The nine subject areas were: Generalist Practice Foundations; Human Behavior and the Social Environment (two courses); Social Policy (two courses); Direct Interventions/Individuals & Families, Community Projects (two courses); Research Methods (2 courses); Field Instruction (four courses); Direct Interventions/Groups and Families; and Thesis (two courses).

### Data Collection

Classroom instructors distributed the questionnaires to the OC students, and site coordinators gave the questionnaires to the DE students. A cover letter instructed the students not to put their names

on the questionnaires, and to deposit the completed instruments in a box at the front of the room. The students were also informed that the results would not affect their status in the program.

### Results

**Table 1** presents the sample's demographic composition based upon age, gender, years of social work experience, and current social work employment. In comparing the DE and OC students, the groups differed in age [(DE)  $M=40$ ,  $SD=7.9$ ; (OC)  $M=32$ ,  $SD=6.6$ ;  $t=5.32$ ,  $p=.00$ ], and current social work employment [(DE) employed  $n=45$ , 83%; (OC) employed  $n=28$ , 65%; Chi Sq.=5.92,  $df=1$ ,  $p=.05$ ]. There were no significant differences in gender and years of social work experience. However, years of social work experience tended to be different, though not significantly different ( $p=.09$ ). DE students had slightly more than six

**Table 1: Student Characteristics by Group\***

Characteristic	DE ( $n=56$ )	OC ( $n=44$ )	Test Result	Significance
Age (Mean & SD)	$M 40$ ; $SD 7.9$	$M 32$ ; $SD 6.6$	$t=5.32$ ; $df=91$	.00
Gender			Chi-Sq.=.70; $df=1$	.29
Female	45 (80%)	38 (84%)		
Male	11 (20%)	6 (16%)		
Years of Experience (Mean, SD)	$M 6.32$ ; $SD 5.94$	$M 4.53$ ; $SD 3.77$	$t=1.7$ ; $df=83$	.09
Current Social Work Employment			Chi.sq.=5.92; $df=1$	.05
Yes	45 (83%)	28 (65%)		
No	9 (17%)	15 (35%)		

\*DE=Distance education students; OC=On-campus students

years of experience, whereas the OC students had almost five years of experience.

**Table 2** (page 58) displays the results of the Practice Competencies Instrument, as well as Values, Knowledge, and Skills Subscales. There were no significant differences in the total scores on the Practice Competencies Instrument [(DE)

**Table 2: Practice Competencies Instrument - Mean Scores by Group\***

	DE (n=56)	OC (n=44)	t Values	Significance
Total Score	M 89.27; SD 5.81	M 87.70; SD 6.13	t=1.30; df=98	.20
Values Subscale	M 29.14; SD 2.5	M 28.25; SD 2.53	t=1.76; df=98	.08
Knowledge Subscale	M 28.04; SD 2.57	M 27.20; SD 2.58	t=1.61; df=98	.11
Skills Subscale	M 32.09; SD=2.68	M 32.25; SD 2.68	t= -.30; df=98	.76

\*DE=Distance education students; OC= On-campus students

M= 89.27, SD 5.81; (OC) M=87.70, SD= 6.13]. An analysis of the Values, Knowledge, and Skills Subscales revealed no statistically significant differences either. However, the DE students scored higher than the OC students on the Values subscale, though these scores were not significantly higher.

Table 3 displays the ranking of course appropriateness for DE inclusion. DE students rated: HBSE and practice methods courses as the most appropriate for DE instruction; Policy was rated in the mid-range; and Community Projects, Research Methods, and Thesis were rated as the least appropriate for DE instruction.

**Table 3: Ranking of Course Appropriateness for Distance Education (n=56)**

Course	Mean	SD
HBSE	3.03	2.06
Generalist Social Work Practice	3.25	2.30
Practice Individuals and Families	3.54	2.51
Practice Groups and Families	3.81	2.55
Social Policy	4.78	2.54
Field Seminars	5.09	2.92
Community Projects	5.56	2.46
Research Methods	6.15	2.39
Thesis	6.64	2.61

## Discussion

### Demographic Data

The DE students in this study were older than the OC students, a finding that correlates with the findings of other studies (Coe & Elliott, 1999; Freddolino & Sutherland, 2000; Haga & Heitkamp, 1995; Kleinpeter & Potts, 2000; Petracchi & Patchner, 2000). This finding has been attributed to DE students' postponement of their plans for professional social work education, because programs are not readily accessible in most rural communities.

More DE students were currently employed in social work positions. This finding is congruent with other studies that reported that greater numbers of DE students remain employed in social work positions while pursuing their graduate education (Coe & Elliott, 1999; Freddolino & Sutherland, 2000; McFall & Freddolino, 2000). The majority of students in both groups had current social work employment. This study's finding that the majority of the OC students had current social work employment may be explained by their decision to matriculate in a part-time program. Like other studies, this investigation indicated that DE learners had more social work experience than full-time OC students had (Coe & Elliott, 1999; Freddolino, 1998). This result may again be attributed to the fact that the OC students in this sample were enrolled in a part-time program.

### Competencies

The analysis of the total scores on the Practice Competencies Instrument and the Values, Knowledge, and Skills Subscales revealed no statistically significant differences in knowledge and skills between DE and OC students. This finding is congruent with the results of other comparability studies that reported no differences in grades (knowledge) and in field instruction performance (values/skills) (Kleinpeter & Potts, 2000; McFall & Freddolino, 2000; Potts & Hagan, 2000). DE students scored slightly higher in the Values Subscale than the OC students did. As stated previously, no information

was found on studies reporting student practice competencies in the areas of values, knowledge, and skills at the time of graduation from a degree-granting program. However, reports of similar outcomes from other studies that employed student performance in individual courses and field instruction, may imply that these measures are good predictors of learning outcomes upon completion of the program.

Variations in the Values Subscale may be attributed to differences in age, level of moral development, social work experience, and variability in community involvement. Kohlberg's (1984) theory of moral development stated that the most advanced stage corresponded to a person's age and indicated that people, who have achieved this stage, have developed universal ethical principles. The fact, however, that there was a tendency, rather than a statistically significant difference, might reflect that students in both cohorts were adequately socialized into the profession's Code of Ethics by the end of their graduate education.

### **Ranking of Courses by DE Students**

The analysis of course rankings by the DE students produced results that both supported and challenged the findings of other studies. Students ranked HBSE and practice methods courses as the most appropriate for DE instruction. HBSE courses have been consistently described in the literature as one the most preferred for DE instruction (Forster & Washington, 2000; Siegel, et al., 1998). However, as stated earlier, the appropriateness of practice methods courses continues to be debated between advocates for their inclusion in DE programs (Coe & Elliott, 1999; Glezakos, 2000; Kleinpeter & Potts, 2000), and skeptics fear that instructional course objectives might be compromised (Forster & Washington, 2000; Thyer et al., 1998).

The findings of this study are congruent with the conclusions of other studies, which found that practice classes could be taught effectively in DE programs. Furthermore, these findings seem to give credence to earlier claims that "social work educa-

tors seem to have a strong bias that the content of these courses can only be introduced, conveyed, and reinforced through face-to-face learning" (Siegel, et al., 1998, p. 75). The DE students' high ranking of practice methods courses may be attributed to: the students' length of employment in social work agencies; their current social work employment; and their accessibility to continuing education programs, as a result of their employment schedules. In addition, they attended four semesters of field seminars on their respective campuses. Collectively, these experiences may allow the students to grasp the material in practice courses with greater ease, than information transmitted in other course offerings.

Policy was rated in the mid-range of appropriateness for DE programs. This is an interesting finding, since policy is one of the courses that is most often offered in DE MSW programs (Siegel, et al., 1998). This incongruent finding may be attributed to the students' limited exposure to, and appreciation of, social policy and its implications.

The students' ranking of research, as one of the least appropriate courses, conflicts somewhat with findings from other evaluative studies (Patchner et al., 1998; Petracchi & Patchner, 2000). Earlier studies concluded that students reported favorable and comparable experiences in research courses, and that both DE and OC students responded well to ITV delivery. However, students in past research were not asked to compare all courses within a social work program. The low ranking of research courses, as appropriate for DE instruction, might be attributed to various explanations. Students may simply prefer other courses, such as HBSE and practice courses. Students in this sample may have been biased against courses with a mathematical emphasis. Instructor experience in teaching these courses may have varied as well. In addition, the fact that the students' rankings included two courses in the research sequence—Computers in Social Work, which was taught by a local instructor, and Research Methods in Social Work, which was

taught over ITV—should be taken into consideration in the interpretation of the students' responses.

Community Projects and Thesis were the two other courses that students ranked as the least appropriate. Community projects, a two-semester course, is a unique offering in the curriculum of this particular program. The first semester of the course introduces students to the history, development, and evaluation of macro practice. In the second semester, the students work collaboratively in small groups to design and implement a community intervention. The low ranking of this course may reflect a need for better instructor knowledge of the involved communities, and greater student difficulty in successfully implementing a community intervention that required collaborative work. More face-to-face instruction might alleviate these factors.

No reference is made in the DE literature regarding thesis courses. In this program, Thesis is a two-semester course offering. The student's thesis research is monitored by a thesis advisor, who visits the students two times each semester, and communicates with them individually by email, mail, and phone. It is possible that the students' rating of Thesis as the least appropriate subject area indicates a need for more frequent contact with the thesis advisor to complete these challenging courses. Other factors to consider might be that fewer library and technical resources, such as editing and statistical consultation, were available to students in rural communities.

This study suffered from numerous limitations. The research instrument employed in this study was developed for this project. Therefore, the instrument had not been previously tested for psychometric validity and reliability. In addition, courses that were ranked for appropriateness by the DE students were taught by different instructors. A number of factors relating to instructors, such as teaching experience and style, content organization, and adaptability to teaching over ITV, may have affected the students' ranking of courses. Also, the multi-method approach to DE—where some courses

were taught in person by local instructors, others were taught over ITV with visits from the instructors, and Thesis was taught in face-to-face contact with the thesis advisor, who visited each site a total of four times during the academic year—invariably influenced the results. A further limitation was that this study took place at one university with students who were exposed to a particular DE model. Consequently, the results cannot be generalized to other DE students and models. In spite of these limitations, it should be noted that this exploratory study of student competencies and course rankings is applied research that reflects the many variables that exist in large DE programs.

This study found that student practice competencies were equivalent for DE and OC part-time students. The main implication is that DE programs can prepare students for competent practice. Schools and departments of social work need to consider further development of DE programs, so that social services and social work clients/consumers can benefit from professionally trained practitioners, who can only access graduate education through such programs. For example, there is currently a shortage of professionally trained social workers in both rural and urban areas of California (Deichert, 2001). Growth in DE programs may well increase the number of practicing, professional social workers in California. It is recommended that this research be replicated in order to test the validity and reliability of the competence instrument used in this study. Replication could lead to the development of more refined instruments for program outcome evaluation.

The findings related to the students' ranking of courses also have implications for further research and social work education. It is recommended that qualitative studies be initiated to explore the reasons students feel some courses are more or less appropriate for DE instruction. Continuing research may lead to modifications in course structure and additional supports, such as the expansion of library resources.



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