

Schools of Social Work Research “Recruiting Students to the Profession”

January 2008

I. Research Introduction and Purpose

This topline report highlights a number of key findings from 18 interviews conducted with National Association of Social Work (NASW) partner schools throughout the United States. The purpose of the interviews was to help guide the development of recruitment tools and materials by NASW that can be used by partner schools in the future.

II. Methodology and Participant Overview

A total of 18 in-depth phone interviews were conducted in December 2008 with Deans, Chairs or Directors of Admissions/Recruitment at Schools of Social Work. The amount of work experience in these positions of those interviewed ranged from two to 28 years, with most having significant experience in their positions or with the school in a different capacity. All of the participants had direct contact with prospective and entering students.

The majority of participating schools were urban (13 of 18 schools) and slightly more than half were public (10 of 18 schools). Half of the programs were located in the east (with all but one of these in the northeast); five were in the southwest; three in the midwest; and one in the northwest. Nine of the schools offered a BSW and 13 offered an MSW, while a number of schools, offered both programs. Also, five schools offered a Ph.D. program.

If the programs were recognized for a specific concentration, it was mostly for clinical practice in the MSW program. Among the other areas cited were “multiple” or “multi-systems” that reflected a more integrated curricula; global/international concentration; gerontology; and administration. For the BSW programs, all are known as “generalist” programs that provide a foundation for students.

Most draw from the “local” area, which varied in definition from a specific mile radius, such as “within 100 miles,” to certain surrounding counties, such the “tri-county area,” to within the overall state and sometimes neighboring states.

III. Executive Summary

NASW has an opportunity to help BSW and MSW programs through a variety of communications and supporting materials. Because schools are trying to reach younger audiences, most interviewees recognized the need to use more electronic means, so the proposed “50 Ways” tool should be a welcomed feature on most schools’ websites.

Moreover, as with previous research, most respondents said students lack an accurate understanding of social work prior to enrolling in a program. They believe many students confuse it with psychology and counseling, and are almost completely unaware of the macro side of the profession, from administration to policy and advocacy. As a result, they said students don’t fully appreciate the breadth and depth of the profession, and do not realize the level of professionalism required, the job opportunities available and the potential to earn a comfortable living (which is a concern expressed by many students).

By seeing an interactive showcase of practicing social workers with a range of titles and responsibilities, students may grasp more quickly what social work really is and what it can be for them. This approach could go a long way to help dispel the misperceptions that many students have. In addition, the related findings should provide NASW with additional directions to consider to further serve its partner schools and meet the continuing needs of tomorrow's social workers.

A. Overview of the Applicants

The profile of most students is predominantly women, Caucasian, in their early twenties and limited to some work experience. This profile reflects the "traditional-aged" student, whether BSW or MSW candidate, and often means the student attends full-time. In most of the programs, the number of minority students exceeds the school's departmental average for minority students, so the social work programs typically have greater diversity than other bachelor's or master's programs.

Most programs attract 10-to-20 percent who are "career changers." In the MSW programs, the percentage can be higher, even up to 50 percent. Most career changers have some experience in the human services fields or in related professions, such as counseling or psychology. It is unusual for students to have made a switch from a completely unrelated profession.

Regarding the number of applicants they receive, responses were evenly split between having enough and not having enough each year. Most arrive qualified, especially at the bachelor's level, since – as interviewees put it – they wouldn't be there otherwise. As for the current economic downturn's impact, many felt it was too soon to tell since the current admissions cycle is just starting. Some said that traditionally a weak economy leads to more graduate students enrolling, while others noted that availability of loans will likely be an issue in the coming year. A few commented on the increase in the number of social work programs as having an affect on recruiting. They don't see the overall number of applicants increasing at the same rate, so programs are competing for the same pool of students.

B. How students learn about and are influenced toward social work

Some participants regularly survey their students to learn how they heard about the school or social work field, while others "wished they knew" the answer ("A recruiter's dream to know the answer!"). There was no single answer, but there is clearly a personal component, whether working with a social worker, having a family member who is a social worker or being referred to the profession from a professional in a related field such as counseling. Many referenced students taking an intro to social work class. The most often cited sources were:

- Peers/fellow students
- Parents and family
- Faculty, advisors
- Introductory class
- Supervisors on the job
- Social workers – some experience with these professionals either personally or professionally at a job
- Online and print resources

An interesting insight by one research participant was that most students interested in the helping profession lean towards nursing, psychology or education.

C. Perceptions, common characteristics and what students are surprised to learn about social work

If there was one area that was consistent, it was the misperceptions about social work and the surprises when corrected. Almost universally, respondents said students do not understand what social work is in relation to other related professions, especially psychology and counseling. Participants believe that students largely see social workers as people who take children away, work with welfare recipients and make no money. As a result, they believe students are most surprised to learn about the breadth and depth of the field, the significant job opportunities and the professionalism required. Almost universally, they said students are unaware of the macro side of social work.

These misperceptions largely reflect students' first encounters with social work, and possible concerns expressed by their parents about the profession. According to participants, as students progress on their academic or career paths, these misperceptions get corrected, so that BSW and MSW candidates no longer hold these views. Most interview participants wanted to make that distinction since they encounter a wide range of students and were quick to point out that they particularly found these views prevalent at the high school level.

Most schools do not conduct formal assessments of candidates, but do have rigorous admissions processes, including at the bachelor's level. For BSW candidates, most require a formal application in the junior year of school (although declaring the major can occur upon entry as a freshman). At the master's and bachelor's levels, essays, interviews and basic academic standings are typical forms of evaluation.

Summing up this mix of evaluative tools, most participants found common characteristics among prospective social workers. Students typically:

- Want to "help people"
- They may have been helped by a social worker and want to do the same for others.
- They are often described as the person others turn to or the one others know will listen to them because they are empathic.
- They are passionate about creating change for others, for communities and society as a whole.
- They may have volunteered or worked for human service organizations.
- They often enter with an intention to counsel others but their desire to seek change can lead them to advocacy, policy and broader social justice reforms.

D. What students are told to encourage them to consider a career in social work

Most participants encouraged students by addressing two, distinct areas: dispelling common myths and appealing to the impact they can make or the personal satisfaction they will receive.

Dispelling the common myths:

- You can make a comfortable living and have a professional, rewarding lifestyle
- It is an extremely broad field with a wide range of opportunities over the course of a career
- The degree is flexible and very transferable and you will not be limited to one area
- It is a profession where you can be employed, even in this economic climate – it is almost recession proof – and can even address jobs not created yet

Appealing to impact and personal satisfaction:

- The need is great, especially for vulnerable populations
- There is opportunity to affect change and make a difference in the world because there is a mission of social justice, which means you can help people on an individual/personal level or on a larger policy or societal level
- You're never bored and always learning something, including about yourself
- You will feel fulfilled and can connect to a deeper part of your personality through helping others

E. How schools reach out to prospective students

Most schools use an integrated mix of outreach techniques:

- Events – career and college fairs, information sessions, luncheons, “meet the dean,” career day, select a major day and other on-campus activities
- Personal outreach – speaking to classes, attending community college events and classes, outreach to baccalaureate program directors and other personal contacts
- Printed materials – brochures, flyers, advertisements in journals or conference programs, and direct mail to existing or purchased lists
- Interactive – the school website, online display ads and search marketing, Facebook and other social networking avenues
- Alumni – through formal programs, events, in the community and on the job, or by word of mouth
- Faculty – teaching introductory classes, attending events and advising to provide guidance and referrals
- Advertising – online, print and radio
- Attend related conferences, such as CSWE, NASW, Idealist.org and baccalaureate events

Most continued to use and experiment with this mix, while not entirely sure which techniques were the most effective. However, for those who did try to pinpoint the best approaches, the following rose to the top:

- The school's website and other interactive media were clearly top of the list
- Faculty, especially introductory classes and attendees of events, were also noted often
- Idealist.org events were also cited more than once as being very effective because these events attract people who know who they are and what they want. The events are more targeted than open college fairs and reflect a good candidate pool

Their least effective techniques varied, but reaching out to high schools posed a major challenge. Overcoming some biases of other faculty on campus, such as preferences to psychology or general lack of understanding of social work, was also noted as an issue to explore.

Most schools have some kind of career center. Some centers work well with the schools of social work (one is headed by an MSW!) and refer people to them but many do not. The general misperceptions about the profession are sometimes prevalent in and around campus, including career centers and with other faculty.

F. Recruiting methods they would like to try and how NASW can help

Many did not have specific suggestions for new recruiting methods, often noting that if they had thought about it, they would have tried it. For those who had suggestions, they either looked for broad, awareness efforts or very targeted promotions or channels toward the youth audience. To be more targeted, they suggested primarily online and interactive means:

- Web chats and live conversations
- Podcasts
- Video
- Facebook and other social networking sites
- General opportunities to download information and “being more techie”
- Radio

Regarding awareness, many felt they needed to target younger age groups and would like to see more efforts at the high school level or early college, such as freshmen and sophomores. Some ideas include:

- Teaching intro classes on social work similar to intro to psychology or sociology to show students that the profession is legitimate, dispel the myths, and show the viability of the profession
- Reaching out to service and learning clubs, or psychology and sociology clubs
- Anything that can change public perceptions and reach earlier influencers
- Provide solid role models
- Consistency in recruiting, such as a package of written materials with hand-outs and brochures that address misperceptions and what people can really expect in a career in social work
- Wrap buses, use billboards – make the profession more visible and realistic
- Appeal to those in related human services fields, such as criminal justice

Many mentioned that the Public Education Campaign is great and it should be continued. They also believed NASW could help in generating further awareness and provided these ideas as suggestions for NASW:

- PSAs to get at public perceptions and provide positive role models
- Show star profiles, such as programs started by social workers, leaders who are or were helped by social workers
- Help people to know what NASW is, who they are and how this is a legitimate profession supported by an organization of professionals
- Develop materials, such as “Help Starts Here,” aimed more at understanding careers and opportunities, and make materials more affordable
- Provide scholarships to help students
- Offer workshops on recruiting students from related fields
- Keep organization strong and advocate for political issues
- Bridge gaps between academia and practitioners and bring them all under one umbrella similar to medical professions

Lastly, many participants wanted to know where this research would lead NASW and hoped to be kept informed.

Survey Respondent Information

Titles – all at Schools or Departments of Social Work

- Director of Admissions
- Chair, Department of Social Work
- Dean, Department of Social Work
- Full Professor, Founding Director of School of Social Work (Created/re-organized in 2001, undergrad only)
- MSW Chair/Director of Admissions & Financial Aid
- Director of Admissions
- School of Social Work Program Director
- Director of Recruitment & Alumni Relations
- Field Director/Intro to Social Work Instructor
- Assistant Dean of Admissions, Graduate School of Social Work
- Director of Student & Community Affairs
- BSW Program Director
- Director of Admissions
- Director of Admissions
- Director of Admissions
- Director of Admissions and Student Services
- Chair, Department of Social Work
- Director of Recruitment and Admissions

Participating Schools

- Boston College
- Boston University
- Catholic University
- Fordham University
- Monmouth University
- Savannah University
- Seattle University
- Simmons College
- Texas Christian University
- University of Arkansas
- University of Buffalo
- University of Chicago
- University of Denver
- University of Houston
- University of St. Thomas
- University of Texas
- Wayne State University
- Westfield State College

For more information, please send an email to media@naswdc.org.

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