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FACTORS INFLUENCING THE DECISION OF MINORITY STUDENTS
TO ATTEND GRADUATE SCHOOLS OF SOCIAL WORK

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ABSTRACT

This study of 255 minority students enrolled in Graduate Schools of Social Work examined factors which influenced them to decide to attend these schools. The most frequently mentioned reasons were the curriculum and location of the school followed by prestige, financial incentives, emphasis on minority concerns and influence of significant others. Those schools which attracted greater numbers of minorities tended to attract them on the basis of curriculum, emphasis on minority concerns and not requiring entrance examinations. Formal recruitment activities were not seen as particularly effective.

Introduction

Since the late 1960's, higher education in general and social work education in particular have made public commitments to, and direct efforts toward increasing the enrollments of, minority students. Unfortunately, the volume of the rhetoric and the surfeit of public declarations have exceeded the actual impact of policies and performance. For example, it was only last year that the number of Black students attending universities and colleges (undergraduate and beyond) was proportionate to their percentage in the population at large (ratio 1:1.03) (Gordon, 1976, U.S. Bureau of the Census, 1977b). Looking at graduate education, the situation is also distressing: 13.2% of all whites 14 to 34 have completed five or more years of college; for Black citizens, the percentage is 5.7 (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1977). The situation is even worse for Mexican Americans and Native Americans. Indeed, recent data suggests that the Black enrollment as a percentage of White enrollment in colleges and universities is beginning a slow decline (Gordon, 1976; U.S. Census Bureau, 1977b).

The call for new commitments in higher education to those ethnic and racial groups who are deprived and discriminated has inspired a confusing array of policies and programs designed to encourage their enrollment or, at least, attract their interest. Programs have been created to establish new recruitment practices or to improve recruitment procedures. Efforts, both lackluster and vigorous, have been made to infuse previously barren curriculum content with minority perspectives; to forge new links between minority communities and the university; and to search for minority faculty who can breathe life and vitality into these corrective efforts.

Social work education is no different than higher education in this regard. Its accomplishments thus far have been an embarrassment to its ethical foundations. Many schools and consortiums of schools have, often under pressure, constructed lattice-works of recruitment, curriculum development, faculty development to redress previous inequities and foreclose future failures.

Current Status of Minorities: Higher Education

In higher education in general, 1.9% of all Blacks 14 years of age and over have completed 5 or more years of college (compared to 3.1% of Whites and 1.8% of those of Spanish origin). This represents a continuing increase of minority students over the past six years. For example, the percentage increase in Black students enrolled in college was 103.4% from 1970 to 1976. For Whites in the same period, the increase was 28% (U.S. Bureau of Census, 1977a). It is difficult to find accurate figures for actual minority student enrollment in graduate schools of all kinds. As a rough indicator, El-Khawas and Kinder's survey of 154 Ph.D. granting institutions by field of study found that the percentage of Black students enrolled in graduate study ranged from 1.4% in the physical sciences to 7.2% in education (Institute for the Study of Educational Policy, 1976).

Current Status of Minorities in Social Work Education. As of November 1, 1976, 10.5% of all fulltime first year graduate social work students were Black, 2.2% Mexican American, and 1.4% Asian American. The percentage of fulltime Black second year students was 11.3%; comparable figures for Chicanos and Asian Americans were 2.5% and 1.7%, respectively (Shyne and Whitcomb, 1977). For Blacks then, the situation is roughly one of parity. In 1975-76, 9,080 MSW's were granted: 11.1% went to Blacks, 2.1% to Mexican Americans, 1.3% Asian Americans, and .4% to Native Americans (Shyne and Whitcomb, 1977). For Black students these figures represent a decline of about 1.5% from 1974

both in social work and, perhaps, in higher education in general (Ripple, 1975).

The message, then, seems clear: some advances have been made, in part, because the situation could not worsen and, in part, because of the highly variable administrative initiatives and intentions. However, especially considering the importance of the minority experience to social work's concerns, there is a long way to go in accurately and genuinely representing minority concerns, perspectives, and realities in social work education. And whatever advances are made will depend significantly on successes in recruiting minority students and faculty.

Previous Research

Research efforts to understand the parameters of minority recruiting efforts and to evaluate their success have no great numbers but are suggestive in implications.

Kleinbaum and Kleinbaum (1976) discovered in a sample comprising about one-half ($n = 322$) of the minority population of the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill in 1972, that 91% chose the school for its academic reputation, 72% because it provided good financial resources, and 62% because of the urging or advice of a friend, relative, or teacher. Unlike the white students sampled, few minorities chose the school for social reasons (53% of the majority students did) and few chose the school because it was integrated or because the town has a reputation for progressive race relationships (at the time of the study, Chapel Hill was one of the few relatively integrated towns in the south with a Black Mayor).

A special recruitment program at Smith College School of Social Work begun in 1969, involved the active seeking out of juniors at Southern Black colleges, providing them with a summer of social work and remedial education, and career planning, and then, after their senior year admitting them to Smith or helping them apply to other schools of social work. Mabel Wells suggested that the initial resistance to their recruiting efforts was due to doubt about the sincerity of Smith's intentions and fears about the rigorous standards of graduate schools. The summer spent at Smith assuaged these doubts. In summary, the program at Smith was as successful as it was because of the extremely energetic recruiting effort (very much akin to the recruiting that goes on within collegiate athletic programs) (Wells, 1973).

Gullerud (1977) is of the opinion that many programs fail in recruitment because most programs are perceived (correctly, he believes) to be assimilative. As such they tend to define ethnic group membership as ipso facto evidence of educational disadvantage and tend only to prepare students (minority and non-minority) to assume roles in majority communities. Few programs are ethnic-directed, designed specifically to prepare students for helping roles within minority communities, and few have realistic and encouraging perceptions and assumptions about minority applicants and students. "There should be a match between ethnic aspirations, program orientation, and employment possibilities." (Gullerud, 1977). Lacking this kind of match, minorities may find the program minimally attractive and, if they attend, find themselves assuming marginal status.

Hernandez, et al., (1973), contend that any recruitment program for minorities in graduate education faces an uphill battle in that "years of uncertainty, ascribed inferiority, postponed or residual gratification are puzzling when someone has already experienced the same process in other ways and is seeking a coherent pattern of adult life." This may help to explain the rising attractiveness to minorities of increasingly open trades and crafts: the financial rewards are more immediate, career development surer, and status anxiety considerably less than in academia.

Design and Method

The usual approach (and there has not been much research in the area) to finding some relationship between school policy and structure and minority enrollment is to correlate various structural and process variables with the measures of the extent of minority enrollment. For example, Mollenhauer (1976) selected a series of 48 predictor variables (predictive of variations in numbers of minorities enrolled at various schools of social work). These variables included: elements of the minority recruitment program; aspects of curriculum and the administrative structure of the school; demographic aspects of the school and its environment; admissions criteria. The results were perplexing, to say the least. The only variable which adequately predicted differences in minority student population size was whether the recruitment program involved personal contact on the part of school personnel (faculty or student). To the extent that it did, higher minority enrollments were found.

Another research strategy, and one employed herein, is to ask the minorities who have enrolled why they selected their school and not

other schools to which they applied. The few studies that we were able to find provide some clues. John Conyers (1968) found that Blacks chose to pursue graduate education (in any field) at a particular university for a complex of reasons that tended to vary dramatically between students. However, three common reasons cited were: the reputation of the school academically, the location of the school (convenient and near a Black community), and the schools' previous contact and experience with Black students. Epps and Howze (1971) suggest in their review of some of the data, that potential graduate students who are Black need to be assured that the school has made every effort to eliminate discriminatory practices and that each Black applicant is aware that these practices do not exist. The same is true, they contend, in the recruitment of Black faculty.

In this study it was decided that opinions of a national sample of minority social work students be examined to discover the reasons these students used in selecting the school of social work they attend. Questionnaires were sent to the admissions officer of every accredited school of social work in the United States. The admissions officers were requested to circulate them to all minority students, first and second year; fulltime and part-time. The questionnaires were mailed out in March 1977.

The measuring instrument was a 68 item questionnaire divided into the following parts: background information, admission procedures, information about the recruitment experience of the students, attitudinal information, work and educational projections and plans, assessment of the school's comparative handling of minority concerns-- curriculum, faculty hiring, etc.--and a summation of the factors that influenced the decision of the student to attend that school. The instrument has both closed and open-ended items allowing students to rate the factors important to their enrollment and to assess their school's performance in certain pertinent areas.

In November 1976 there were approximately 3,000 fulltime and part-time minority students in schools of social work in the continental United States (excluding both Howard and Atlanta Universities). Thus minority students account for 16.3% of the total number of graduate students enrolled in schools of social work (Shyne and Whitcomb, 1977). Out of this pool of minority students, 255 questionnaires were returned, approximately 9% of the total population of minority students. We can safely generalize beyond the respondents because probability sampling procedures were not utilized and the low rate of return.

Of the 255 respondents, 49% were Black, 19% Mexican American; 13% Asian American; 6.7% Native American; 1.6% Puerto Rican; and 10% were an assortment of other minorities including other Latinos. The median age of the respondents was 26.4 years; 68% were female and 32% were male; 65% were presently married and 35% were not married. The median family income was \$9,980. These 255 respondents represented 40 different schools (47%) of social work in the continental United States.

As a measure of the attractiveness of different schools to minorities and the relative effectiveness of these schools in enrolling minorities, the percentages of minority students in each of the schools were computed from CSWE data and added to each respondent's data record. Schools were classified into those with a low percentage (LP) of minority enrollment (0-12%), those with a moderate percentage (MP) of minorities (13-27%), and those with a high percentage (HP) of minorities (28-51%). Approximately 1/3 of the respondents fall into each of these categories. By categorizing the schools in this manner we can examine a crude notion of the variable impact of recruitment efforts and policies on minority enrollment as well as the effect of the numbers of minority students on individual minority students' relevant perceptions about their school.

Results

Attractiveness of Schools. Examining the most frequently mentioned attractions to schools yields some interesting differences between those students attending LP, MP, and HP schools.

The prestige of the university or social work program in particular was mentioned as a prime attraction by 12.7% of all the respondents with little difference between students in LP, MP, or HP schools. While 30.2% of the respondents named the location and proximity of the school as important, the minority students in LP schools were more likely to do so than minority students at either MP or HP schools. Curriculum seemed more important to students at HP schools than students at LP and MP schools. Financial incentives, prominently cited in the literature as an essential or the central reason for selection of a school influenced only 11.2% of the respondents, and students in LP schools were more likely to assess it as important. In one study, previously cited, 62% of the respondents named the encouragement of a significant other as a reason for selecting a university (Kleinbaum and Kleinbaum, 1976). Among respondents in our study, only

Table 1

Most Frequently Mentioned Attractions to Selected Schools
of Social Work by Level of Minority Enrollment

Attractions to Programs	Level of Minority Enrollment							
	Low (0-12%)		Moderate (13-27%)		High (28-51%)		Total*	
	N	%	N	%	N	%	N	%
Prestige of School in Program	(15)	11.0	(21)	15.2	(16)	11.7	(52)	12.7
Location and/or Proximity of School to Residence	(47)	34.6	(42)	30.4	(35)	25.5	(124)	30.2
Curriculum	(39)	28.7	(39)	28.3	(48)	35.0	(126)	30.7
Financial Incentives	(19)	14.0	(15)	10.9	(12)	8.8	(46)	11.2
Influence of Significant Others	(12)	8.8	(8)	5.8	(9)	6.6	(29)	7.1
Emphasis on Minorities	(4)	2.9	(13)	9.4	(17)	12.4	(34)	8.3
Total	(136)	100.0	(138)	100.0	(137)	100.0	(411)	100.0

*Total N is greater than the number of respondents due to multiple responses to this question.

7.1% noted the importance of a significant other in this process and again, more students from LP schools than students from either MP or HP schools. Finally, and interestingly enough, considerably more students in HP schools recounted the school's emphasis on minority concerns as an important reason for selecting the school. By way of interpretation, we might suggest that students from HP schools are somewhat more likely to choose a school for reasons related to perceived

intrinsic qualities--curriculum, minority perspectives--than students from NP or LP schools. All the students were most influenced by either curriculum or proximity. The relative weakness of financial incentives was surprising given the literature and the conventional wisdom. However, it must be remembered that we are asking students after they have already enrolled and experienced graduate education for at least six months.

Table 2

Factors Associated With Minority Student Attendance at Graduate Schools of Social Work by Level of Minority Enrollment

Factors Associated With Student Attendance	Level of Minority Enrollment			Total (N=255)
	Low (N=84)	Moderate (N=89)	High (N=82)	
Contacted by Recruiter	24.1%	27.0%	28.3%	26.6%
Official Recruitment Information	13.0	35.0	13.1	17.5
Student Involvement in Recruiting	16.4	36.7	53.6	35.3*
Presence of Recruitment Publicity	16.7	20.0	36.4	25.8**
Word of Peers	76.1	71.4	50.8	77.0
Having an Entrance Examination	54.1	26.3	23.6	65.1***

* $\chi^2 = 21.6$, $df = 2$, $p < .0001$

** $\chi^2 = 12.5$, $df = 2$, $p < .002$

*** $\chi^2 = 17.5$, $df = 2$, $p < .0002$

Recruitment. With respect to recruiting efforts per se, 35% of the respondents indicated that students were involved in their recruitment, but this percentage was significantly higher for students in HP schools. Given the expressed concern about minorities in social work education, recruitment publicity directed at minorities would seem an obvious tactic. According to our respondents, it is a slightly employed tactic, however obvious. About 25% of the respondents identified recruitment publicity as important, 75% made no such identification. Once again, respondents from HP schools were significantly more likely to perceive and note recruitment publicity directed at minorities at their schools. Of interest, too, is the fact that only 27% of the respondents were actually contacted by a recruiter; the remaining 73% mentioned no such contact. This did not vary much by the three categories of schools. Only 17% of the total respondents were influenced by the recruiter to attend a given school. The implications appear to be that certain aspects of recruiting may be important (to the extent they are mentioned by students in HP programs), but official recruiters themselves may be of lesser importance. Peer contact (other students) and media efforts may ultimately have more effect than the singular, administrative forays of an official recruiting officer.

Entrance Requirements. The debate over the effect (political, social, and individual) of entrance examinations on minority applicants has hardly subsided in recent years. To some observers, many minority hopefuls perceive the entrance exam as a dread prospect and avoid it by selecting schools where one is not required. The report of the respondents here indicates that nearly two-thirds of them (65.1%) were not required to take an entrance examination. However, over one-half (54.1%) of the students in LP schools did take an entrance exam, compared to only a quarter of the students in MP and HP schools. A tentative conclusion, then, might be that entrance exams, often accused of cultural bias, drive away prospective minority students. (And, in this study, may account for the low percentage of minorities at schools which require such exams.)

Influences of Significant Others. Although there was little difference between the three groups of students, it is interesting to note, comparatively, the influence of peers as opposed to the influence of official recruitment information on students' decisions to attend a particular school. On the one hand, 77% of the students cited information about the school passed through peers as especially important. On the other hand, only 17.5% identified the influence of official

recruitment information as important. Informal networks, it appears, are overwhelmingly more influential than official formal networks.

Student Perceptions of School on Pertinent Minority Issues. It has been assumed that minority students are concerned about minority issues and perspectives and that their attraction to a school may be dictated by their judgments, however premature or ill-formed, about where a school stands on certain of these issues with respect to other schools. We asked students to give us a comparative rating of their schools on several issues pertinent to minorities. Did they think their school was better than most, about the same as most, or worse than most with regard to these issues?

When asked to rate how their schools compared to others in percentage of minority students enrolled, about 30% of the respondents assess their schools as about the same as other schools, 25% as better than most, and 45% as worse than most. The perceptions of the students seem reasonably accurate here as the differences between the assessments of students in LP, MP, and HP schools relate to actual percentages of minorities enrolled. 41.3% of the students in HP schools rate their school as better than most schools in the percentage of minority students enrolled. This compares with 11.6% and 22.6% of the students' ratings in LP and MP respectively. On the other hand, 59% of students in LP schools, and 50% of students in MP schools rate their schools as worse than most in this regard. Only 26% of the students in HP schools make such an assessment.

Similarly, students in LP and MP schools are significantly more likely to rate their schools' image in the community as worse than most compared with students in HP schools. Also, the students in HP schools more frequently see their schools as having a positive image in the minority community.

Considering their perceptions of numbers of minority faculty, students from HP schools seem more disposed to judge the percentage of minority faculty at their school as better than most but, a greater percentage also judged their schools as being very poor in this regard. This may only mean, of course, that some HP schools have a relatively high percentage of minority faculty and some do not. Or, it may suggest that students in HP schools, because of their numbers may be more critical and have higher standards for performance at the school, and recognize that while their school may be doing relatively well, few schools do well enough.

Table 3

Minority Student's Perceptions of Their Particular School of Social Work

How Does Your School Rate	Level of Minority Enrollment			D*
	Low % (N=84)	Moderate % (N=89)	High % (N=82)	
1. In Number of Minority Students Enrolled				
Better than most	11.6	22.6	41.3	
About the same	29.5	27.4	32.5	
Worse than most	59.0	50.0	26.3	.0001
2. In Image of School in Minority Community				
Better than most	13.9	20.8	33.4	
About the same	38.9	41.5	39.7	
Worse than most	47.2	37.5	26.9	.03
3. In Number of Minority Faculty				
Better than most	11.7	23.9	31.6	
About the same	35.1	25.0	20.3	
Worse than most	53.3	51.2	48.1	.03
4. Involvement of Minority Faculty in Decision Making				
Better than most	11.1	21.1	29.5	
About the same	54.2	43.4	32.1	
Worse than most	34.7	35.6	38.5	.03
5. Absence of Racism				
Better than most	16.2	12.8	28.2	
About the same	55.4	64.0	46.2	
Worse than most	28.4	23.3	25.7	.08
6. Commitment of the School to Minority Recruitment				
Better than most	11.7	22.9	39.3	
About the same	29.9	27.7	26.6	
Worse than most	58.5	49.4	34.2	.002

*probability level derived from chi-square

A similar effect is observed when the students are asked to assess the degree of minority faculty participation in decision-making. Students from HP schools perceive their schools as better than most more frequently than students from MP and LP schools (they account for 49% of such assessments) but they also are the most likely to assess their school comparatively as poor in this regard.

Students from HP schools were also the most likely to assess their schools as comparatively free of racism and to assume that their school has a higher commitment to minority recruitment than students at schools with lower levels of minority enrollment.

Discussion and Conclusions

In this study of 255 minority students in graduate schools of social work several points emerge as significant. The curriculum of the school and the location of the school were the most frequently mentioned attractions, followed by prestige, financial incentives, emphasis on minority concerns and influence of significant others. It was found that the more successful schools of social work (in terms of attracting minorities) were more apt to attract minority students on the basis of their curriculum and their emphasis on minority concerns than the less attractive schools. The extent to which students are part of the recruitment process appears to be an important item as the more successful schools of social work (in terms of attracting minorities) were more likely to involve their students in recruiting than the less successful schools, and also to engage in recruitment publicity (posters, TV, radio, etc.). Because contacts with official recruiters were so slight the effectiveness of recruiters is uncertain.

Word of mouth, i.e., information communication networks tended to be more important in student decisions to attend a school than official recruitment, i.e., the formal communication network. It was determined that schools with high percentages of minorities tended not to have entrance examinations whereas schools with low percentages of minorities tended to have them. It can be concluded that entrance examinations serve as repellants to potential minority applicants. The perception of the individual student's selected school as to its attractiveness to minorities tends to be consistent with actual selection practices. That is, those schools which appeared to provide the most attractive atmosphere for minorities tended to be the most successful in attracting minority students into their program.

It seems, then, that minority students were attracted to schools for primarily academic reasons: a curriculum relevant to their career interests and the curriculum response to particular minority concerns and issues. They do not go to schools primarily for money or for social reasons.

Formal recruiting programs may be somewhat wasteful in that informal contacts by current students seem singularly important to applicants. Perhaps the word of a student is regarded as more trustworthy. It may be, too, that the potential student may perceive this word as an accurate sign of the emotional and social support available at the school.

Minority students tend to perceive their schools accurately in terms of their accomplishments in areas of minority concern. If that is the case, then we might expect that the informal network relays this information to the prospective students, and is another element in the attraction process.

Finally, and very important, there is a clear relationship between the use of entrance examinations as an admissions requirement and the percentage of minority students enrolled. While the debate about these examinations rages on, minority students appear to avoid schools which require them as one of the rites of passage.

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