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PROFESSIONAL RETENTION OF BSW SOCIAL WORKERS:
PLANNED AND ACTUAL CAREER CHOICES*

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ABSTRACT

The assumption that BSW students will remain in social work was examined with a survey of 107 current students and 177 graduates from 1977 through 1980. The findings suggest that most of the current students planned to practice social work and most of the graduates entered social work practice upon graduation. Recent graduates, however, had more difficulty obtaining social work jobs than graduates in 1977. Characteristics of social work education are not associated with retention, leading to the hypothesis that factors outside the control of social work education are more predictive of BSWs' retention in the profession.

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Since the landmark study of graduate students was conducted by Pins in 1960 with a follow-up in 1966 (Golden, et al., 1972), the profession of social work has recognized the need to understand its personnel characteristics and anticipate its future needs (Siegel, 1975). More recently, with the shift in social and economic policy leading to a decrease of funds for social service programs, the issue of future social work employment has continued as a professional concern. For social work education this issue has particular import for survival within academia. A decline in the employment of social workers will eventually affect enrollment of students in social work educational programs. The future of social work education and perhaps the profession, may well be related to the ability of graduates to obtain employment. Implicit in most studies of the utilization of the social work labor force is the assumption that social work students want to remain in the field upon graduation (Enos, 1978). However, no study has been found which examined the validity of this assumption in terms of BSW students' planned and actual career choices upon graduation (Gockel, 1967; Merle, 1967; Brennen and Arkava, 1967; Quartaro, 1981; Mahler, 1982; Atkinson and Glassberg, 1983).

The research objectives of this study were:

- 1) To ascertain the social work career goals and actual career choices of upper level undergraduate students and BSW graduates; and,
- 2) To describe the perceived importance and satisfaction of 14 internal social work education characteristics (i.e., quality of faculty, students and teaching; opportunity for field training and electives; required number of courses; and reputation of college in university and the community) among current students and BSW graduates. Data gathered in relation to these areas provide information about the importance of these internal factors in social work education that may be associated with the professional retention of BSW social workers in the field of social work.

METHODOLOGY

The population used for this study consisted of 107 juniors and seniors enrolled in an undergraduate social work program in 1981 from a large public university in the Southeast and 177 BSW graduates of the same program for the years 1977 through 1980. A 13 page self-administered questionnaire was designed to gather information on students' career goals and choices, grade point averages and satisfaction with their social work education including: overall educational preparation, and a variety of internal educational characteristics. A total of 86 questionnaires were returned representing an 80 percent return rate. Graduates were asked additional questions pertaining to their current employment and, when applicable, their reasons for leaving social work. A total of 101 questionnaires were returned for a 57 percent response rate. The overall return rate for both samples was 66 percent.

FINDINGS

Study Sample

The majority of the current student respondents are white (95 percent), female (84 percent), state residents (85 percent), single (74 percent), and 22 years of age or younger (69 percent). Over half grew up in a city of at least 50,000 (59 percent) and most are from middle or upper middle class families (77 percent). The majority of recent graduates are white (94 percent), female (79 percent), state residents (74 percent), and 26 years or younger (72 percent). Approximately half are single (47 percent), 44 percent are married, and nine percent are widowed, separated or divorced. Most grew up in middle or upper-middle class families (71 percent) and 41 percent grew up in a city of at least 50,000. The demographic characteristics of the current students and recent graduates are fairly homogeneous excepting for appropriate age differences and marital status changes.

National demographic data on baccalaureate students in social work indicate that the study sample is similar although the percentage of minorities is

smaller than that reflected in the current national BSW student population (Rubin, 1981). Therefore, findings may be generalized to other undergraduate social work programs with a degree of caution.

Career Goals

A major objective of this study was to ascertain future career goals of current upper-division, undergraduate social work majors and actual career choices made by recent BSW graduates. Based on their career goals and choices, both groups were divided into three categories: social work practice, graduate education in social work, or out of social work. Descriptive information is presented separately for current students and graduates.

Current Students: Just over half of the current students plan to practice social work upon graduation (51 percent), while 19 percent plan to attend graduate school in social work (see Table 1). However, 27 percent plan to pursue an area other than social work upon graduation. In addition, it is interesting to note that 14 percent of the seniors, compared to 24 percent of the juniors plan to attend graduate school upon graduation. At the same time, 32 percent of the seniors plan to get out of social work but only 21 percent of the juniors chose that response. This may suggest that as one nears graduation and the prospect of going to work in an uncertain job market, the decision to leave social work is more appealing than attending graduate school. On the other hand, the juniors in the sample (who may be aware of the limited job market) seem to be more willing to postpone their entry into the job market by attending graduate school.

While 51 percent of the currently enrolled students plan to enter social work practice immediately after graduation, most plan to further their professional education at some future point. In response to the question, "Do you ever plan to further your professional education?", 73 percent said yes, 25 percent were undecided, and only one said no. Almost all who said yes plan to obtain a master's degree in social work. Among the 23 (27 percent) who plan to

Table 1: Planned Career Goals of Current Students by Class Year

Career Goals	CLASS YEAR		Total %
	Juniors %	Seniors %	
Social Work Practice	48	55	51
Social Work Graduate School	24	14	19
Out of Social Work	21	32	27
Undecided	7		3
Total	42	44	86

leave social work immediately, 7 plan to get advanced degrees in fields other than social work (i.e. 3 in law, 2 in public administration and 2 in family studies) and 14 expressed an interest in obtaining an M.S.W. sometime in the future.

BSW Graduates: Actual career choices for the four cohorts of BSW graduates are as follows: social work practice (42 percent), graduate school (20 percent), and out of social work (39 percent). A complete description by class year is shown in Table 2.

Of the 42 graduates who went immediately into social work practice, 22 plan to obtain an MSW sometime in the future, 2 plan a joint MSW-MBA degree, and 8 plan to obtain degrees in such fields as law, public administration, counseling and psychology. Only 10 reported a decision not to pursue graduate studies.¹

Interestingly, more respondents left the profession from the 1980 class (54 percent) than any other. Conversely, 70 percent of the 1977 class

practiced social work while only 29 percent of the
 Table 2: Actual Career Choices of BSW Graduates upon
 Graduation by Class Year

Career Choice	CLASS YEAR				Total %
	1977 %	1978 %	1979 %	1980 %	
Social Work Practice	70	47	38	29	42
Social Work Graduate School	10	20	24	18	20
Out of Social Work	20	32	38	54	39
Total	10	34	29	28	101

1980 class went immediately into social work practice upon graduation. While conclusions based on the small number of 1977 graduates may be suspect (N=10), it is clear from this data that fewer BSW students remained in social work upon graduation in 1980 than in the preceding three years.

Of the 39 subjects in the BSW sample who responded that they were not employed in social work, 29 or 74 percent said they could not find a position in the profession. Excluding the small sample of 1977 graduates (N=2), from 1978 to 1980 the percentage of students unable to find a social work job increased from 64 percent in 1978 to 73 percent in 1980. Although the year to year sample size is too small to test for statistical significance, there is a linear trend suggesting that social work positions for BSW graduates were increasingly hard to find. While this finding corresponds with the growing financial plight

in the state where this study was done, where there have been massive layoffs in state social service agencies as well as among other government employees (NASW News, 1982), it is also consistent with recent research completed in Pennsylvania on twenty-one BSW programs from 1976 through 1979 (Attinson and Glassberg, 1983).

Of the 10 remaining respondents who said they did not want to stay in social work, 6 left and 3 went immediately into graduate school in the related fields of nursing, public administration and theology and 1 stayed home to have a child.

INTERNAL FACTORS OF SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

The second objective of this study was to explore the degree to which social work education has an influence on BSW students' decision to remain in social work in comparison to variables outside the educational setting. Educational characteristics were labelled internal factors (i.e., within the control or influence of social work education) in contrast with external factors outside of academia (i.e. availability of jobs, salary levels, nature or work, etc.).

In order to examine the relationship of internal factors to professional retention of BSW's in social work, several items concerning students' perception of their social work education were included. Respondents were asked first about their overall satisfaction with their educational preparation, and then specifically about the importance of and their satisfaction with 14 educational characteristics.² They were also asked their grade point averages in social work and other courses. These variables were compared with career choice immediately upon graduation to determine their association with retention in social work.

Overall Satisfaction with Educational Preparation

Both current students and graduates were more satisfied than dissatisfied with the educational preparation received in their undergraduate program. On a 5 point scale with 1=very dissatisfied and 5=very satisfied, mean scores were 3.5 and 3.8 for current

students and graduates respectively. The modal response for both groups was 4 (somewhat satisfied). There were no significant differences between the current students (by class) or graduates (by year) on t-test analysis. While few trends were identified it appears that current students are somewhat more dissatisfied than the graduates. It is generally believed, at least for students in social work, that satisfaction seems to be a function of the length of time out of school, that is, satisfaction tends to increase with post graduation experiences.

Overall satisfaction with educational preparation in social work was then compared to career choice for both current and graduate samples of respondents. There were no significant differences between any of the career groups either within or between study samples. This finding may be accounted for by the unique situation that BSW graduates encounter; namely, they did not voluntarily choose to leave the profession but were "forced out" because of the unavailability of social work jobs. Or, undergraduate social workers who remain in social work do not differ significantly in terms of satisfaction from those who leave the profession, rather, they differ in relation to whether they can secure social work employment upon graduation.

Social Work Education Characteristics

The educational items were developed to identify educational characteristics presumed to be important to social work students. Respondents were asked to rate the importance and level of satisfaction of each item in relation to their social work educational experience on a four point scale where 1=not important/not satisfied and 4=very important/very satisfied.

In general, current students tended to rate each educational characteristic as more important than the graduates. On the other hand, graduates tended to be more satisfied than current students with each educational characteristic except for the quality of students in social work programs. Only two educational characteristics were significantly more important for current students than for graduates: the college's reputation among other students ($t =$

2.04, 182 d.f., $p < .01$) and the college's reputation among other faculty ($t = 3.275$, 181 d.f., $p < .001$). This finding may simply reflect the increasing emotional distance or detachment from academia that tends to occur following graduation.

Each of the educational characteristics were then compared to the graduate sample by career choice. Again, there were no significant differences on either importance or satisfaction for any of the educational characteristics. This finding lends further support to the conclusion that, among this study sample internal factors within social work education are not related to retention in the profession.

Grade Point Averages

Another internal factor that was believed to be associated with retention in social work was grade point average in social work and other university courses. Again, no significant differences were found between the three groups of career choice. However, an interesting trend was observed when GPA scores were examined. For social work courses only, the percentage of graduate respondents in the highest GPA category (between 3.5 and 4.0) was: attended graduate school in social work (88 percent), entered social work practice (54 percent), and left the profession of social work (44 percent). The same trend was observed for cumulative university GPA scores, ranging from 65 percent for those who went to graduate school, 32 percent for practice, and 14 percent for those who left social work. In other words, higher GPA students (both in social work and other courses) in this study were more likely to attend graduate school in social work, while those who received lower grades left the profession of social work. While these findings are encouraging for the profession, in terms of retaining the better academic students, these results were not statistically significant.

IMPLICATIONS FOR SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

Although this study describes only one institution's alumni and student population, the findings are consistent with other recent investigations and are of relevance to the

professional retention of baccalaureate social workers. The baseline descriptive data presented here identify trends from 1977 to 1982 and are useful in monitoring changes in retention levels and employment patterns of BSW students in the future.

The majority of current and recent graduates in this undergraduate social work program would prefer to remain in the profession upon graduation. Although a surprisingly large number of high GPA students plan to pursue a graduate degree in social work at some time, an important implication of this study is the need for undergraduate and graduate social work programs to explore new resources for employment, especially those that are not directly tied to federal and local funding resources. It seems clear that such exploration and expansion of choices would enable graduates to be more marketable in the near future.

Another important implication from this study concerns the lack of association between the internal educational characteristics described and retention in the profession. It would appear that the decision to remain in social work is not based upon internal factors within the control of social work education but, rather, on external factors in the job market. Although this study addressed only undergraduate education, MSW graduate retention may also be related to these external factors as noted in a recent exploratory study by Herrick et. al., (1983). There are no significant differences between BSW graduates who are out of social work and those who are currently in the profession on any of the variables defined in this study leading one to conclude that BSW graduates are different only in their ability to obtain social work employment. Social work educators should begin now to address this issue in order to assess the degree to which social work graduates can literally enter the profession, particularly during the continuing economic crisis.

As reflected by the findings of this study, career choices for social workers will change during the 80's, requiring more creative and realistic education of students in order to meet the exigencies of the economic marketplace, to retain BSW practitioners in the field of social work, and perhaps most importantly, to ultimately meet the social

welfare needs of society.

NOTES

1. At the time they were surveyed, however, 10 of the 42 graduates were no longer employed in social work. Two were enrolled in MSW programs, 1 was in an MPA program, 3 were homemakers, 3 were working out of social work, and 1 was seeking social work employment.
2. The educational characteristics were: quality of social work faculty, amount of time with social work faculty; social work faculty interest in your professional career, you as a person; the reputation of college among other students, among community practitioners, among other faculty; quality of students in social work program; quality of teaching by social work faculty; opportunity for training in social work practice; quality of experience with field supervisor; opportunity to select social work electives; opportunity to select university electives; required number of courses. A copy of each study instrument is available by request from either author.

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