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Preparing BSW Social Work Students for Social Justice Advocacy

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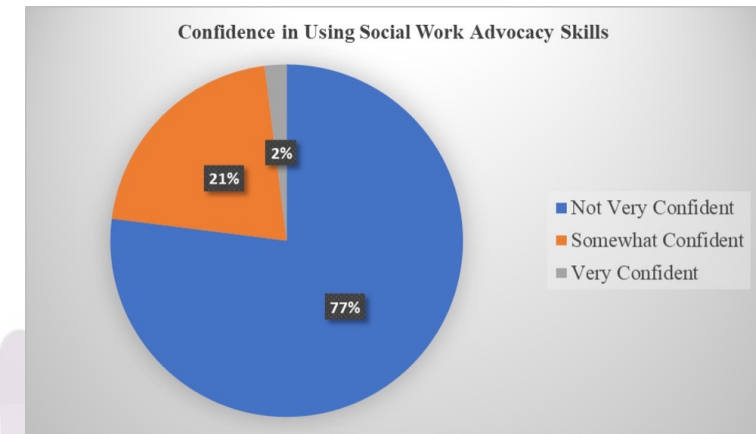
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Background/Purpose

There is no denying that the social work profession has a long history of social justice advocacy. However a review of the literature from the 1970s and 1980s indicates advocacy and political action were not necessarily a focus in social work education, leaving social work graduates feeling inadequate to advocate on a broader, macro level (Haynes & Mikelson, 2000). In the early 2000s, there was a movement of social workers, along with NASW, who recognized and promoted the essential involvement of the social work profession in advocacy efforts (Moore & Johnston, 2002). Current pedagogical practices in advocacy highlighted in the literature focus on increasing critical consciousness (Pitner & Sakamoto, 2016), constructing critical conversations (Kang & O'Neill, 2018), and developing moral courage (Fenton, 2019). What is unclear is how effective these pedagogical practices have been in increasing students' confidence in participating in advocacy activities. The purpose of this study was twofold: (1) explore BSW student perceptions of confidence in participating in advocacy activities and (2) observe if students choose social work advocacy responses in certain social justice situations.

*References available upon request.

Methods

This exploratory study utilized data drawn from students enrolled in a BSW program in the fall 2021 semester from two participating universities in the United States' central region. All 200 students in both BSW programs, were invited to participate in this study, utilizing an online survey. Participating students (N = 61) had completed a social policy class and at least one social work practice class. On the survey, students were given examples of social work advocacy activities and then asked how confident they were they could participate in these advocacy activities. Students were then presented with four videos, less than five minutes each, representing differing social justice situations including sexual assault, poverty, police brutality of African Americans, and systemic racism. After viewing each video scenario, students were asked to choose their most likely response to the social justice situation they viewed.

Demographic Characteristics

| Characteristic | n | Percent |
|------------------------------|----|---------|
| <i>Gender Identification</i> | | |
| Female | 55 | 90.2 |
| Male | 5 | 8.2 |
| Other/Prefer not to answer | 1 | 1.6 |
| <i>Age Ranges</i> | | |
| 18 – 24 | 28 | 45.9 |
| 25 – 29 | 9 | 14.8 |
| 30 – 39 | 12 | 19.7 |
| 40+ | 12 | 19.7 |
| <i>Race/Ethnicity</i> | | |
| Hispanic/Latinx | 26 | 42.6 |
| Other | 16 | 26.3 |
| White/Caucasian | 19 | 31.1 |
| <i>Geographic Location</i> | | |
| Rural | 16 | 26.2 |
| Suburban | 24 | 39.3 |
| Urban | 20 | 32.8 |
| Prefer not to answer | 1 | 1.6 |

*Other for Race/Ethnicity category = African American, Asian-Eastern, Native American, Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, Mixed, Prefer not to answer

| Video Scenario | Social Work Advocacy Responses | |
|------------------|--------------------------------|----|
| | n | % |
| Police Brutality | 26 | 43 |
| Sexual Assault | 28 | 46 |
| Poverty | 21 | 35 |
| Systemic Racism | 19 | 31 |

Results

Approximately 77% (47/61) of students reported they were not very confident at all they could participate in the social work advocacy activities presented, and approximately 21% indicated they were somewhat confident. In reviewing the response choices of students for each of the social justice video scenarios, it was discovered that fewer than one half of the students surveyed were likely to choose a social work advocacy response.

Conclusions

A conclusion from this study could be that social work students lack hands-on advocacy experiences in their educational programs that could bolster confidence. Another conclusion might be linked to cultural competency. Having a lack of experience interacting and engaging with those outside their own background or identity, students may not be able to fully understand, empathize with, or have a sense of social justice for those from other identities, races/ethnicities, or cultures. A final conclusion could be perceived dangers in advocacy activities. In today's socio-political environment, there are valid fears of being vilified on social media or even physical danger while taking part in peaceful marches or protests.