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BARRIERS TO MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS AND RESOURCES EXPERIENCED BY ONLINE GRADUATE SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS

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BARRIERS TO MENTAL HEALTH SUPPORTS AND RESOURCES
EXPERIENCED BY ONLINE GRADUATE SOCIAL WORK STUDENTS

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Social Work

by
Joseph B. Camacho

May 2022

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ABSTRACT

The focus of this qualitative exploratory study was to examine barriers online graduate social work (MSW) students encountered in obtaining mental health services. To obtain relevant data, the researcher interviewed online MSW students at a public university in southern California. This project employed bottom-up data analysis techniques by using open and axial coding to categorize and synthesize varied participant experiences. Relationships between axial codes were identified and analysis provided a window into the student experience for these online graduate social work students.

This study uncovered a phenomenon that this author calls the participants' "student experience" as they pursue their online graduate social work education. First, students experience at least one mental health stressor as a product of being online students in a graduate program. Then, students confront some form of internal or external stigma as they consider whether they will seek care. Next, participants sought mental health services through on and off campus providers. And lastly, students navigated the barriers to access they encountered during the care seeking phase. As a result, universities and social work program administrators are obligated to provide their students with equitable access to the mental health care their students require.

This study contributes to the social work profession and builds on current research by taking a closer look at the online MSW student experience. The synthesis of this experience into an observable cycle of student stressors,

barriers of stigma, attempting to seek services, and confronting limited access to mental health care describes how study participants encountered barriers to obtaining care.

This study directly benefits the social work profession. First, administrators armed with a better understanding of student experiences can provide benefits to individual students at a micro level. However, this understanding can also provide a path for administrators to reimagine educational programs, supports, and services at the mezzo and macro level. Ultimately, programs providing online MSW students access to relevant resources and supports is consistent with the values of the social work profession.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study was successful because of the patience, flexibility, support, and guidance of my research supervisor, Dr. Teresa Morris. Similarly, this project stands on the shoulders of the previous research and the experiences, wisdom, and generosity of my study participants. Thank you for answering the call.

My path to social work is very much the product of the hard work of Josh, Kumar, David, and Bill. And while the work continues, you each helped bring me to this moment and I would be remiss if I did not say how much I value each of you. I hope you are as proud as I am grateful.

And most importantly – none of this would be possible without the love and support of my family. To Kelly, for believing in me when I did not and for being simply irreplaceable - you're my sun and moon. To Grace, Joey, Ricky, and Amiya, for giving me purpose each day and for reminding me what I fight for. To Dad, for being there when I needed you most, you'll never know how much that meant to me. To Mom, for always being my biggest cheerleader, I love you. And lastly, to all my family, friends, and loved ones that have helped me along the way, thank you and I love you all.

DEDICATION

This is dedicated to Carlos Luis Camacho. You are never forgotten.

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CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Background

The social work profession is situated at the forefront in the struggle for greater societal equity. In their roles, whether it be as students, interns, or professionals, social workers serve as advocates for the normalizing, destigmatizing, and eradication of the mental health epidemic in the United States (US). Their work is critical to the realization of achieving a vision of a more socially just and equitable society. However, this work also carries with it the potential for being detrimental to the social workers and graduate social work students that perform it (O'Neill, Slater, & Batt, 2019). The risks to the social worker include workplace stressors and myriad challenges that are inherent to the position. However, the challenges the social worker faces do not begin upon employment, as the literature demonstrates the various challenges students encounter in pursuit of their degree. This qualitative research builds upon the literature documenting the challenges that online graduate students experience and focuses on online social work students. The participants of this study were sampled from an online graduate social work program in southern California. The goal of the research was to acquire a better understanding of their experiences in accessing mental health supports and resources, and the findings of this study can be significant to the field of social work if better ways to serve these students are uncovered as they prepare to enter the profession.

In the profession, the risks to the social worker include workplace stressors due to unmanageable caseloads, low pay, limited opportunities for advancement, and unwieldy roles within the profession. Emotional stressors from secondary trauma can accumulate when confronting clients' issues surrounding abuse, poverty, violence, addiction, and other serious challenges. These consequences of these interactions can lead to social worker burnout and take a serious toll on both the worker and their family. (O'Neill, Slater, & Batt, 2019). While the profession presents inherent challenges of its own, social workers can face many of these same experiences prior to their entry into the workplace setting while pursuing their graduate level education.

As observed in their professional counterparts, graduate social work students confront significant obstacles throughout their educational journey. These can often include elevated stress levels and other psychological challenges which stem from their studies and field work placements/internships. These symptoms and experiences have led to risks for students that mirror those of social workers working in the field. Particularly, graduate social work students report symptoms of exhaustion, burnout, and secondary trauma resulting from their exposure to the presenting issues of their clients (Diebold, 2017). These mental health symptoms are factors that can lead to negative outcomes for students in the areas of academic performance and completions (Conley, Durlak, & Kirsch, 2015).

The plight of graduate social work students is not necessarily unique, as research shows us that all students are experiencing mental health symptoms in the pursuit of their education. And while students can expect a typical amount of stress and anxiety that is inherent to the college experience, there is a tipping point where these symptoms become unhealthy for the individual. The feelings of stress, anxiety, and depression enter the mental health domain when these symptoms begin to interfere with daily life.

The literature is overwhelming that across our campuses many students have reached this tipping point, and consequently, there is an ongoing mental health crisis tearing at the heart of our colleges and (Moeller, Seehuus, & Peisch, 2020). The mental health crisis is not unique to any student, program, or degree level, and certainly applies to the graduate social work students attending the university in southern California that was the subject of this research project. And the interference that mental health challenges introduce into daily life inevitably includes academic pursuits. This is what makes these challenges inextricably linked to academic success and outcomes, and in the macro sense, the social work profession itself (Schwitzer et al., 2018).

The risk for of mental health challenges experienced by students and the potential for academic consequences is exacerbated by the concurrent Covid-19 global pandemic. The literature suggests that Americans are experiencing elevated symptoms of stress, anxiety, and depression resulting from the pandemic. Research argues that these consequences are related to the

disruption in daily life and uncertainty that individuals experience in this post-covid world.

Some of the concerns that students are grappling with include questions about how work will evolve, whether school will remain online due to covid precautions, the health of loved ones, and worries about contracting the virus (Meleo-Erwin, Kollia, Fera, Jahren, & Basch, 2020). This pandemic-driven worsening of the mental health condition of Americans, including its college students, only increases the risk of poor academic outcomes on a population where so many are already in crisis. This realization is the basis for systemic intervention that is consistent with the principles of equity and social justice and reflect two concepts which can be found at the core social work.

The concept of equity, in the context of higher education, is concerned with known disparities regarding educational outcomes between traditionally successful students and students that are historically underrepresented in colleges and universities. These underrepresented groups include, but are not limited to, ethnic/racial minority students, first generation college students, students on the lower end of the socio-economic scale (SES), veterans, former foster youth, student-parents, and disabled students (Chang, London, & Foster, 2019). Considering this knowledge, equity in higher education must include the context of mental health and acknowledge the issues students are facing. This study seeks to gain an understanding of the challenges that online graduate social workers experience at their graduate social work program. As these

challenges are identified and documented, the role of equity within higher education demands that institutions take necessary steps to help students overcome these challenges.

As more is known about the distress students experience associated with their pursuit of higher education, more also needs to be known about the experience of students in the graduate social work program at the university being studied. Particularly, what are the experiences of those that seek their graduate degree in social work virtually and receive their education fully online. And of these students, we must know what resources and supports are available to them to address the mental health challenges they might experience. Therefore, this project asked the following research question: What barriers do graduate social work students experience when attempting to access mental health support(s) and resources at their university?

Purpose of the Study

With the greater understanding of the significant challenges both social workers and graduate social work students face, this exploratory project aimed to shed light on the mental health resources and support(s) available to graduate social work students at the university they attended. Developing further knowledge and understanding of the obstacles that online graduate social work students encounter can help universities develop comprehensive support systems for this online student population. Any findings that support this outcome

can increase the efforts to make these institutions more equitable for their students.

Significance for Social Work

As previously mentioned, social work is at the forefront of matters pertaining to mental health and the advancement of social justice. The latter point, the concept of social justice, is enshrined in the National Association of Social Workers' (NASW) Code of Ethics. As is the value of "service" which is defined as to "help people in need and to address social problems" (NASW, n.d.). Ensuring that all students, and especially those pursuing their online graduate social work education, can access mental health support(s) is both an advancement of social justice and in line with the NASW core value of service.

Additionally, social work exposes its personnel at risk of suffering from issues such as secondary traumatic stress (STS), vicarious trauma (VT), and burnout (Singer, Cummings, & Moody, 2019). This is not good for the person, nor the field. To break the cycle of burnout within the profession, it would behoove the universities that train future social workers to take a proactive approach to the challenges that plague the profession. For this reason, reputable institutions must consider the equitable access to the full range of tools, services, and treatments available to graduate social work students if there is going to be a change in the social work profession towards greater awareness and self-care.

Conclusion

A rich foundation of literature documents the challenges that both social workers and graduate social work students face. The impacts of these challenges on social workers and social work students are felt throughout the profession and within the world of social work education. However, there is limited data on the experiences of online graduate social work students and the resources they have access to address the challenges they are sure to encounter. This qualitative study will attempt to better understand the experiences of graduate social work students and identify potential solutions for graduate social work students and the institutions that serve them.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

The importance of meeting the mental health needs of college students of increasingly diverse student bodies throughout the US is a growing focus of research across myriad professions. This chapter reviews in depth the matters that surround this research as it pertains to the areas that span mental health and equity within higher education. The larger literature of mental health in colleges and universities will be reviewed, as well as the most prevalent symptoms that students experience. The research strongly suggests that the most frequent symptoms include elevated levels of stress, anxiety, and depression that students endure (Barrable, Papadatou-Pastou, & Tzotzoli, 2018) and will be the focus of the symptomatic review.

These most common mental health challenges will then be analyzed in the context of the current Covid-19 pandemic and considered with the known experiences of graduate social work students, particularly in the areas of elevated stress, anxiety, and depression. The final area of literature will explore the concept of equity in the context of higher education as the theory guiding conceptualization of this project. Understanding equity within this lens will be critical to understanding how access to mental health support(s) and resources in higher education, and in particular for online social work graduate students at the campus that is this study's research site, is a matter of equity and fairness; can

improve the lives and educational outcomes of graduate social work students; and is consistent with the core values of the social work profession.

This chapter focuses on and synthesizes the literature in the relevant areas of stress, anxiety, and depression in the context of higher education. Additionally, it utilizes concepts therein to better understand the larger issues of mental health and other related challenges as they pertain to graduate social work students at the university this study samples from. Better understanding of the needs of social work graduate students and ensuring their access to critical mental health support(s) and resources will further the professional aim of the social work profession to provide that the needs of all are being met in an equitable manner consistent with the social work values of service, social justice, and dignity and worth of the person.

Mental Health in Higher Education

The higher education systems of the world are confronting what research increasingly describes as a mental health crisis on college and university campuses. Previous estimates place about twenty-one (21) million students enrolled in higher education, or roughly 6.5% of the population (Laidlaw, McLellan, & Ozakinci, 2015). This large portion of the population is known to experience troubles surrounding mental health and substance, as the data shows us that approximately 75% of all mental disorders, as well as substance abuse disorders, occur during this time between the mid and late twenties (20s). Findings suggest that as many as one-third of students on college campuses are

suffering from a “clinically significant mental health problem” (Lipson, Lattie, & Eisenberg, 2018). Further, it has been shown that nearly half of college aged persons had a psychiatric disorder, and that college students suffer from higher occurrences of mental stress compared to those not attending college (Bíró, Ádány, & Kósa, 2019). While the larger society wrestles with the issues of mental health, higher education remains at the forefront of the mental health crisis in the US.

This population of students experiences tremendous amounts of stress from several sources as they transition into, and navigate through, the higher education system. These sources of stress may be the product of preexisting conditions, but they can also derive from academic and financial stress that comes with the pursuit of higher education (Laidlaw, McLellan, & Ozakinci, 2015). Increased demands on students and their inability to cope with them all is commonly the source of symptoms students experience and can be cumulative for the growing number of students entering higher education with existing psychiatric disabilities. In fact, a study by the American College Health Association (ACHA) found that the challenges that students face leave them feeling overwhelmed (86%), anxious (57%) and significantly depressed (35%) to the extent where it interferes with not only their academics, but their ability to function (Goodman, 2017).

In 2014, college students self-reported their “lowest level of emotional health in 25 years,” and that “longitudinal studies of successive generations of

college students are demonstrating increasing levels of severe mental illness” (Locke, Wallace & Brunner, 2016). The literature is firm on the prevalence, and increase, of the mental health challenges that students face. The most common symptoms students experience are elevated stress levels, anxiety, and depression (Lattie, Lipson & Eisenberg, 2019). And while this is not an exhaustive list of possible mental health challenges that students face, these most common forms of mental health symptoms and diagnoses – stress, anxiety, and depression – will serve as the primary focus of this project.

Stress in College Students

Stress is an unavoidable part of life. So much so, that we are currently witnessing the highest levels of reported stress than any other generation before it (Locke, Wallace, & Brunner, 2016). That a study by the Anxiety and Depression Association of American (ADAA) found that 70% of US adults reported to feeling at least a moderate level of daily stress (Beiter et al., 2014). For the purposes of this project, the operational definition of stress will be “the relationship between the person and their environment that is appraised by the person as taxing or exceeding his or her resources” (Karaman et al., 2019). Another definition that captures a similar framework for stress is illustrated in a two-step process. The first step occurs when a person experiences some event that is viewed as challenging or threatening – this is the stressor. When a person feels or believes that they cannot meet the demands of the stressor, the second step of the process is initiated (Thompson, 2017).

Within stress itself lies two subtypes. The first is eustress, which is a positive response to stress. The second is distress, which is the negative response to stress (Musabiq et al., 2020). An example of a eustress response is being motivated to complete an assignment prior to the deadline. The inverse reaction to the same circumstance would be the feeling of being overwhelmed by the deadline. That is, the reaction of, commonly, anxiety or fear to the initial stressor that the person experiences.

The subtype of distress can yet again be divided into three areas. The first area is referred to as daily stressors, and those are smaller incidents that one encounters throughout daily life. The second area includes acute stressful life events, which include more severe life events that can last several days at a time. The last and most severe area is chronic stress, or ongoing conditions that one must constantly grapple with (Eisenbarth, 2019). Continual or extended exposure to these stressors can significantly impact the mental health of a college student (Thompson, 2017). Persistent stressors, whether they originate from college or personal life, are no doubt a part of the college student experience.

The stress experienced in college can come from several sources, to include feeling overwhelmed with responsibilities, mental exhaustion, academics, finances, relationships, and sleep problems – and women report experiencing these at a higher rate than men (Hubbard et al., 2018). One survey of college students found that 80% of respondents were experiencing stress, 70% reported

lack of motivation, 55% reported feelings and anxiety. Of these respondents, 65% attributed those feelings to course deadlines, 54% associated them to exam pressures, and 52% also identified balancing studies with other commitments and academic performance/grades (Barrable, Papadatou-Pastou, & Tzotzoli, 2018). These stressors can present and build throughout the year but tend to culminate at the end of the semester with final examinations (Ardelt & Bruya, 2020). The stress toll that college students is both intense and prolonged, and it can lead to significant problems for the individual.

Some of the negative impacts that stress has on students can lead to a variety of outcomes. Physical symptoms include lack of energy, lack of appetite, headache, and stomach issues. Higher levels of distress can produce symptoms of anxiety, depression, suicidal ideation, poor lifestyle, sleep disturbances, and feelings of helplessness (Musabiq et al., 2020). These impacts are detrimental to the student and can lead to several negative behaviors, such as substance abuse, violence, and other self-harming acts (Eisenbarth, 2019). Any number of these results can have a devastating impact on academic success and lead to larger mental health problems such as anxiety or depression. Management of stress can reduce these symptoms and improve academic outcomes (Benjet, 2020).

Anxiety in College Students

We are not merely more stressed than we have ever been. According to the American Psychological Association, no generation has experienced more

anxiety than this one (Locke, Wallace, & Brunner, 2016). As the rise in mental health conditions has surged across the country those reporting them on college campuses as increased as well. One study found nearly half of college students reported a psychiatric disorder, of which the most common was anxiety (Bíró, Ádány, & Kósa, 2019). Another found that 70% of those surveyed reported daily symptoms of moderate or higher levels of stress or anxiety (Beiter et al., 2014).

The concerns that students attribute to anxiety are in many cases like the causes of those that reported feeling elevated levels of stress. They include “academic performance, pressure to succeed, and postgraduation plans” (Jones, Park, & Lefevor, 2018). Another similarity to stress is the impact that anxiety can have on an individual. Some responses to less intense feelings of anxiety can help lead to academic achievement. However, when students are overwhelmed with feelings of anxiety it can be debilitating and negatively impact the academics (Jones, Park, & Lefevor, 2018). Students also encounter test anxiety, which is centered on excessive worries and negative thoughts around exams. These can lead to symptoms of tension, and difficulty with concentration and sleep. As a coping measure, these students may not only perform poorly on exams, but they may skip them altogether – leading to higher levels of overall anxiety (O’Donnell, 2016).

Another impact that mirrors stress responses in college students is financial strains. And research tells us that poverty is increasing among those within the higher education system. Worries about money can cause

deterioration in both physical and mental health and can also increase levels of anxiety. Increases in costs for higher education finds students worrying about paying for tuition and fees or meeting other financial obligations. This can often lead students to work longer hours and sacrifice time for their studies, which can also lead to increased levels of anxiety (Jones, Park, & Lefevor, 2018).

Students that struggle with anxiety not only struggle with their studies, but also experience a poorer quality of life than those without these symptoms. Colleges and universities that help students cope with anxiety can help them manage their symptoms in the long run and lead to better academic outcomes and students' quality of life (Beiter et al., 2014). Addressing anxiety in college students is beneficial to the institution, student and can help improve both academic and social aspects of campus life.

Depression in College Students

The existence of depression in higher education is well documented. And like anxiety, depression is also linked to high levels of and/or chronic stress (Thompson, 2017). In fact, one study found that it was the most prevalent diagnosed condition amongst college students (Bíró, Ádány, & Kósa, 2019). Another placed depression as the second most common problem amongst college students in receipt of college counseling services (Bissonette & Szymanski, 2019). College counseling centers across 275 colleges and universities were queried and reported large increases in rates of clinical depression compared to the previous five (5) years (Moeller & Seehuus, 2019).

It is also believed to account for nearly half of all disease in young adults. In the context of higher education, nearly 40% of college students reported feeling depressive symptoms so intense that it interfered with daily functioning (Bissonette & Szymanski, 2019). Additionally, 10% of college students surveyed reported “having been diagnosed with, or treated for, depression in the past twelve (12) months,” which is significant in the context of approximately half of those diagnosed with depression seek treatment (Beiter et al., 2014). While the data is at times scattered across different regions or periods of time it is overwhelming in that depression is a serious problem amongst college students in the US.

Students that suffer from depression experience several symptoms. These include nervousness, irritability, sleep issues, and problems with concentration. The same study found other behaviors that stemmed from depressive symptoms included the use of substances, such as tobacco, marijuana, and cocaine as coping mechanisms, that led to substance abuse (Thompson, 2017). Another study found “poor diet, lack of exercise, poor sleep habits, and noncompliance with medical treatment recommendations” to be common among students suffering from depression (Beiter et al., 2014). Students that worked more than ten (10) hours per week indicated increased depressive mood and reported feeling overwhelmed and having low energy and motivation (Thompson, 2017).

The biggest risk associated with depression is suicide. Research identifies as depression as the primary risk factor in both suicidal ideation and suicide

attempts. This study also found that 16% of students had experienced recent suicidal ideation and reported being at least moderately depressed (Keskindag et al., 2018). This association between depression and suicide is unique in that it elevates mental health to not only a mental health crisis, but as a crisis of public safety on our colleges and universities. And all these risks and problems associated with depression can negatively impact academic outcomes for students and deserve the attention of colleges and universities across the nation.

Context of Covid-19

This research is being performed during the Covid-19 global pandemic. And while the literature has not had the benefit of time to be fully developed, there are aspects that are known to have an impact on both mental health and higher education that require acknowledgement. For the traditional on-campus/in-person learner, their educational experiences, as well as their lives, were upended when colleges and universities were forced to go to a fully virtual platform in response to the pandemic. These closures had negative psychological impacts on students – particularly those that received counseling services from campus counseling centers (Zhai & Du, 2020). A study by the ACHA found that college students are experiencing elevated rates of anxiety, depression, and panic attacks compared to the already problematic pre-pandemic numbers (Alemany-Arrebola, Rojas-Ruiz, Granda-Vera, & Mingorance-Estrada, 2020).

Further, social isolation, disconnectedness from friends and family, and uncertainty brought on by the societal adaptations to the pandemic has led to both anxiousness and depressive symptoms amongst college students. These feelings were compounded when financial issues were created or exacerbated by the many job losses created by the pandemic. And the fears of infection, and particularly of loved ones, children, friends, and especially those most vulnerable to poor health outcomes are yet another contributing factor that college students contend with during the pandemic (Zhai & Du, 2020). Like the previous severe acute respiratory syndrome (SARS) outbreak of 2003, the current Covid-19 crisis has had a profound impact on both psychosocial and mental health (Wang et al., 2020). One post-pandemic study found that 48% of students showed moderate or severe levels of depression, 38% exhibited moderate or severe levels of anxiety, and 18% admitted to suicidal ideation in the two weeks prior to the survey (Wang et al., 2017).

These snapshots of the negative mental health impacts of the Covid-19 pandemic are global in nature, universally felt amongst all people, and can be just as prevalent, if not more so, on college campuses around the world.

Online Graduate Learning

While there is an abundance of data studying many aspects of online learning, there is limited research available regarding the experiences of graduate social work students. There is even limited data in understanding how online students experience stressors compared to their in-person counterparts

(Bojan & Bents, 2020). The absence of data in these areas serve as the basis for this study being exploratory in nature. Acknowledging this limitation of data is appropriate, however, it should also be noted that the literature overwhelmingly supports the breadth and scope of mental health challenges that university students are facing and remains foundational to this study.

Some of the challenges that online graduate students experience include difficulties in community building, fewer opportunities for social and educational interactions, and a lack of strong faculty relationships (Shepherd & Bollinger, 2019). Pollard & Kumar (2021) also found relationships as key, with positive relationships between graduate students and faculty identified as critical factors that determine graduate student success. The literature identifies student relationships as a recurring concern for online graduate students. Along with these relationships, other challenges that online graduate students experience include academic anxiety, problems with technology, communication challenges, lack of feeling connected, cultural differences, and the limitations of online platforms (Pollard & Kumar, 2021). The additional challenges online students must navigate, when combined with stressors that university students are documented to experience, can be even further compounded when the stress of the field work placement is considered. A better understanding of these factors is key in better serving the online graduate social work student.

Social Work Context

Mental health is a concern of elevated risk for graduate social work students as social work students are uniquely positioned to face increased levels of stress and/or other mental health challenges, when compared to students in other academic programs. The graduate social work student, through their field work/internship placement(s), encounter clients in several agencies and organizations where social work is performed (Diebold, Kim & Elze, 2018).

Social work field placements are often in areas of high stress, high need, and usually low resources. When social workers engage in these placements they are usually placed for limited periods of time. O'Neill, Slater & Batt (2019) found that these time limitations can mean that if students are exposed to the trauma of their traumatized clients, they may experience short-term secondary traumatic stress (STS), rather than longer term vicarious trauma (VT). STS takes place when a social worker experiences emotional crisis due to an interaction with a trauma survivor but did not experience the trauma firsthand. Social work students that experience STS may experience sleep disturbances, emotional avoidance and numbing, and burnout (O'Neill, Slater, & Batt, 2019).

Academic stress is another factor that social work students struggle with. Specifically, challenges with field placement, essays, course structure, due dates, instructors are primary sources of academic stress. Other stressors that social work students experience outside the classroom include commuting, familial obligations, work, and finances (O'Neill, Slater, & Batt, 2019). For social

work students the challenges are numerous and require the support(s) and resources to help avoid stress, burnout, and the STS that students confront in class or in field placement (Diebold, 2017). The challenges that higher education present to mental health, in the context of the Covid-19 pandemic, as they pertain to the elevated risks that social work students navigate, make the importance of supporting the mental health needs of graduate social work students as critical as ever.

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

There are factors unrelated to education that impact whether a student will be successful. Racial disparities, much like those observed in larger American society, exist in higher education as well. For example, persons of color are less likely to earn college degrees, become professors, administrators, or hold several other positions in the higher education system (Museus, Ledesma, & Parker, 2015). One answer to address these disparities is by the equitable distribution of resources and opportunities by higher education institutions.

This project is guided by the Adams (1963) seminal work on equity. Adams discussed social inequities and focused his research on wages and the workforce. Huseman, Hatfield & Miles (1987) state that “individuals evaluate their relationships with others by assessing the ratio of their outcomes from and inputs to the relationship,” and that, “if the outcome/input ratios of the individual and comparison (relationship) are perceived to be unequal, then inequity exists.” When simplified, the concept of equity is entrenched in a very basic

understanding of fairness and the distress one experiences when unfairness is perceived (Huseman, Hatfield & Miles, 1987).

This study utilizes equity in the educational setting, rather than workforce setting that Adams (1963) utilized. One of the first references to equity in the context of education was in 1990, when the need for equity and equality in education was becoming well defined (de los Santos et. al, 2020). Often, equity research in higher education is concerned with student outcomes and any disparities experienced by racial or ethnic groups, or other demographical indicators (McKown, 2012). However, the equity framework this study adopts strives for the distribution of goods to “create a system that are more likely to delivery equality” (de los Santos, et. al, 2020). Thus, any inequities this study uncovers could be addressed by fairer distribution of resources and provide for equitable outcomes for social workers, and consequently, have positive impacts for the social work profession.

Equity in higher education is the elimination of disparities between various subgroups, to include racial and ethnic groups, socio economic status, first generation college students, academic preparedness, gender identity, sexual orientation, ability level, veteran status, and other populations. This vision for equity in higher education is echoed by the university system which the study site is a member of. This commitment by this university system is but one lens in which equity will be measured. The other lens will measure the university which is the study site’s commitment to equity in the context of student mental health by

asking if the social work program and university under study has made the same realization that many other institutions have, which is that institutions “cannot educate the minds of their students without attending to the health of those same minds” (Goodman, 2017).

Conclusion

This chapter and the literature therein demonstrate the reality of how mental health is impacting our universities. These challenges can arise from typical academic stressors, but can elevate into chronic stress, anxiety, depression, and other serious problems. These symptoms, if left unchecked, have been found to lead to poorer health, mental health, and academic outcomes for university students around the world.

The impact of mental health stressors can be compounded when the field placement component of the graduate social worker is considered, as social work placements can often involve consistent interactions with multiple clients that have traumatic and/or disturbing circumstances. This is a risk factor that graduate social work students confront as a planned and expected part of their education that other programs and students do not. These risks have only been compounded by the covid-19 pandemic for social work and non-social work students alike. By studying the experiences of graduate social work students through an equity lens, this study may uncover a better understanding of how to serve graduate social work students in an online format.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

This study sought to determine what barriers, if any, online graduate social work students encounter when they attempt to access the mental health supports and resources. This chapter outlines how the qualitative study was executed. The elements of the research process reviewed include the details of the study design, the type of sampling used and why it was selected, the data collection method and instrument used, the data analysis process, and how this study addressed the protection of human subjects.

Study Design

The purpose of this qualitative research study was to explore what barriers, if any, that online graduate social work students experienced in accessing mental health resources. A review of the literature investigating this topic and population suggested that this was an exploratory study, or a study that has not been heavily investigated by other researchers.

Individual, face-to-face interviews were carried out over zoom. During the interview, respondents were asked about any experiences they had in accessing mental health services. Then, participants were asked to identify any actual or perceived barriers in their pursuit to obtain mental health services. The use of a face-to-face interview over zoom was the appropriate tool for allowing the

exchange of confidential information and provided the necessary tools needed for data collection and interview transcription.

The virtual interview was selected due to the distance between participants and investigator, and consistent with covid-19 precautions. All respondents received equal levels of confidentiality pertaining to their responses and/or experiences with their on-campus access to mental health support(s) and their opinions on what can be done to improve this service area to graduate social work students. Interviews were held in one-on-one settings within private environments, the data was stored on a password protected university online platform, the data was reported in the aggregate to minimize the chances for participant identification, and the data was destroyed upon project completion.

This carefully designed study engaged and recruited relevant participants, employed measures to protect confidentiality and its human subjects, and implemented a secure data collection process. Responses were analyzed and results and conclusions were drawn from those data and reported in the context of equity, higher education, and impacts and implications for social work.

Sampling

Study participants were selected using non-probability convenience sampling. This form of sampling was the most appropriate choice for two reasons. First, the objective of this study was to understand and document challenges that participants encountered. Therefore, reaching students that self-identified as having grappled with these experiences was foundational to the data

collection process. Second, after participants were identified, the study aimed to provide a window into the experience that respondents had with seeking and obtaining mental health supports. This method of sampling was the most appropriate with this qualitative objective in mind. Another means of sampling may have been appropriate had this project sought a quantitative understanding of the frequency in which students were experiencing these challenges in the larger population. However, that was not the case in this study. For these reasons, non-probability convenience sampling was the most efficient and appropriate sampling choice.

Potential respondents were solicited via email. An initial, and follow up email was sent to online graduate social work students at their university email address by the School of Social Work that they were enrolled in. Students were informed of the purpose of the study, provided a copy of the informed consent document, and were notified of how to proceed should they want to participate in this study. Students were notified that participation in this project was completely voluntary and that participation did not impact program completion or provide for any other academic or personal benefit of any sort. Interested respondents were confirmed to be online graduate social work students and were scheduled for an interview if the individual wished to proceed.

The number of responses from potential participants outpaced the number of respondents that ultimately completed the study. This occurred because there were many interested persons that did not meet the fundamental requirement of

being an online graduate social work student but were “in person” graduate social work students. While their input is valuable, it was not the focus of this study. The total of interviewed respondents numbered six persons. These online graduate social work students all identified as women, were between the ages of 25-50, and were ethnically, racially, and linguistically diverse.

Data Collection and Instruments

This study utilized face to face interviews over zoom as the primary method of data collection. Participant interviews were administered virtually at a time and date that was convenient for the participant. Prior to beginning the interview, all participants were provided another opportunity to discuss the informed consent document and ask any questions regarding the confidentiality which protects their responses from identification and disclosure. Participants were also reminded that the interview was voluntary, that they could elect not to reply to any question, and that they could end the interview at any time and for any reason.

The interview was sectioned into two (2) parts and comprised of three (3) questions requesting basic demographical information. These include age, gender identity, and ethnicity. These questions were followed by seven (7) questions asking respondents about their experiences accessing mental health supports as a graduate social work student. The topics of the questions asked about the student experience in an online program, experience seeking mental health services, and any barriers encountered along the way. Lastly, participants

were asked how their university could better serve them (SEE APPENDIX B). These interviews lasted 30-45 minutes and were held and transcribed over the zoom virtual meeting platform.

Data Analysis

The transcripts of the collected data were analyzed, and patterns were identified and documented. Then, documented patterns were categorized into recurring themes to enrich the understanding of the collected data. These themes are the basis for the open codes that were developed. Further analysis of the open codes provided the basis for the axial codes that underpin and connect the themes and the findings.

The open codes were developed by analyzing each interview and breaking down interviewee responses into smaller pieces or phrases. The themes that develop from these elements of the data were labeled and are the subsequent open codes this study utilizes as the foundation for its findings. Upon the completion of the open coding process, the open codes are further analyzed for overarching themes that connect the open codes to one another. These open codes are then categorized into specific groups and given labels. These labels are the axial codes that this study utilizes to create a richer understanding of the data and experiences of participants.

Protection of Human Subjects

The protection of human subjects was achieved by multiple measures. First, confidentiality and privacy of participants was protected via the

administration of individual interviews. Interviews were held in a secure and private area where third parties were not present to compromise the data. Second, all data collected was stored on the encrypted and secure university google platform, and all data was deleted upon completion of the project. Third, all data is reported in the aggregate to minimize the discovery of participant identities. And lastly, participants were forewarned that there exists the possibility that some questions may produce an adverse reaction within the respondent. While this is not anticipated, all questions can be skipped, and participants can remove themselves from the study at any time without penalty of any kind. These are the protocols in place to ensure that human subjects experience little-to-no negative impacts from participation in this study.

Conclusion

This study utilized a systematic approach to investigate the mental health care seeking experiences of online graduate social work students. The study was designed intentionally, with sound rationale grounding its sampling and data collection methods. The data collection instrument was thorough, provided flexibility to encourage participant engagement, and took the necessary steps to minimize any risk to respondents. The following chapter provides an overview of the data analysis process and describe the method of analysis and tools utilized to produce thoughtful and trustworthy findings.

CHAPTER FOUR

DATA ANALYSIS

Chapter four provides an account of the data collected from the interview process. These data were analyzed, and themes were identified and categorized into open codes describing various aspects of online graduate students' experiences accessing mental health services. Open codes were then reviewed and placed into larger groups, or axial codes. This chapter enumerates and defines the open and axial codes generated from the interview transcripts and the analysis that extrapolates the overarching concepts within the data. This analysis uncovered themes between participant responses that begin to paint a picture of the online graduate social work student experience.

Open Codes

Undefined Access

Access is defined by graduate social work students as a range of conditions that make obtaining mental health services difficult. This code was generated because access is a recurring theme, yet there were times when participants were unable to identify specific points with regards to how lack of access impacted their ability to seek services. In the cases where participants did not provide specificity, this code became useful in tracking the responses and enrichen the data. One example of a respondent providing undefined access as a challenge is, "Access was my barrier. It was my obstacle. It's just hard, I don't

know how to access it.” Others mentioned “access” as a problem, without providing at which point access was an issue for them.

Lack of Program Resources

This code was generated because multiple respondents identified the academic program as having failed to provide them access to mental health resources and services. One participant said, “I do wish they (program) did offer it (services) because I would have taken full advantage.” Another said that “services were not available to us because we hadn’t paid a specific fee.” In this instance, the “us” the respondent referred to is online graduate students. This is known because all participants were all online graduate students.

Absence of University Services

This code was generated because multiple participants differentiated between their perceived obligation of the academic program to provide mental health services to its students, and the obligation of the university to provide care options. One participant said that they did not seek campus services because they knew that “the university did not offer services to online graduate students.” Another stated that the “University did not offer us services.” And one stated that “campus mental health services were not available to us.” These responses provided were explicitly focused on the University and its failure to provide care to all students.

Off Campus Hurdles

Off Campus Hurdles are the challenges that graduate social work students experienced when attempting to obtain services outside of the University proper. These options include community-based providers, private insurance plans, and independent private practitioners. This code was generated because multiple participants expressed difficulties accessing private care. One person said, “I’m definitely running into a shortage of therapists.” Another was “provided a list of therapists that did not accept their insurance.” And one respondent shared that “finding a therapist was just really hard.” These challenges with access were directly associated with respondents’ experiences attempting to obtain care outside of their campus.

Affordability

Affordability refers to the out-of-pocket costs associated with obtaining mental health services. When free or low-cost care options were not available to participants, the high costs of care became another factor that respondents grappled with. This code was generated because multiple participants identified high costs of care as a consideration and barrier to receiving care. One respondent said, “I still don’t feel that I can easily access mental health without taking on an additional financial burden.” Another participant mentioned they were confronting the “barriers of cost.” Since seeking on campus care was not an option for these online graduate social work students, high costs prevented more than one respondent from seeking and obtaining care.

Limited Time

The concept of limited time is expressed by respondents as the amount of time they have, after meeting all their competing obligations, to invest towards seeking and/or obtaining mental health care. This open code was generated because multiple participants identified a perceived lack of time, for differing reasons, as a barrier to receiving care as students in an online graduate social work program. One respondent summarizes that obtaining services as difficult due to a lack of “time, because we have deadlines and it’s hard to prioritize what’s most important.”

Hours of Availability

Hours of Availability is understood by participants as an obstacle that presents itself because of the hours that care options may be available to them. This is differentiated from “limited time” because if a student can make time to obtain services, the services may not be available during the hours that are available to the student. This provided the rationale for the generation of this open code because multiple participants identified the hours that mental health services are generally available (regular business hours) as a barrier to receiving care. One respondent stated that, “For someone that’s working and going to school, and, you know, has other responsibilities, they’re only offered during the day.” Another said that getting care was difficult due to the “limited availability that they have, and scheduling time slots for someone that’s going to school and working.”

Campus Inquiry

Campus Inquiry was one method in which a graduate social work student can utilize to seek mental health care. This open code was generated because multiple participants identified that they had sought services on campus. These attempts were made through their academic program or by contacting campus services directly. One respondent stated that after receiving campus emails about mental health services, "I went into the website, and I called the number." Another shared that in seeking services on campus, "I've looked at the website and I know what they're doing on campus." Participants even turned to program faculty for support, sharing that they reached out to their field liaison and research advisor for help with "just kind of processing what I was going through and because they were all clinicians." This open code emphasizes the importance of participants seeking services on their university campus.

Off Campus Inquiry

Off Campus Inquiry is any form of inquiry into mental health services that online graduate social work students attempted that occurs outside of the University context. This code was created because some respondents identified attempting to seek services but did not specify whether these attempts were made on campus, off campus, or a combination of both. One participant stated, "I got a list of mental health services and ended up calling a few of them and I never got a call back." Another response explained that they had sought services within their community of faith, stating, "I went through my church." This open

code acknowledges that another way participants sought services was through off campus providers.

Elevated Stress

Stress was reported as having been experienced by multiple respondents. This code was created because elevated levels of stress were specifically identified as a stressor that students were facing in their online graduate social work program. One participant stated that “it’s been really stressful.” Another stated they experienced “a lot of stress” as a student in their program. And a third said that their “increased stress was a trigger” for them. This open code provides an appropriate level of focus on the role that stress plays in the online graduate social work experience.

Isolation and Loneliness

Isolation and loneliness were described as a part of the online social graduate social work experience. This code was created because isolation was identified by respondents as a stressor they encountered as a student in their program. One respondent reported that they felt both, saying “there was definitely a sense of isolation and loneliness” as they progressed through the program. The creation of this open code supports this element of the online experience.

Anxiety and Depression

Participants described past diagnoses of anxiety and/or depression, or the presence of the symptoms of both, respectively. This code was created because

of these experiences reported by students in their online graduate social work program. When asked to identify specific stressors, one participant said they experienced “Anxiety. Definitely, anxiety.” Another, when asked the same question, said they were “worried about their depression.” It is clear the data supports the creation of this open code.

Academic Workload

The Academic Workload refers to the amount of work that students are expected to produce and complete. This code was created because academic workload was identified by multiple interviewees as a stressor that they experienced in their program. Participants mentioned “the difficulty of the academic work” as a stressor. They also said that “being a student in this program has definitely led to my increased need to reach out for mental health services.” One student identified the workload as a “trigger.” The intensity of the academic workload, as described by the respondents, provided for the opportunity for this open code to be created to capture their experience.

Time Commitment

Time Commitment is the amount of time that participants spend engaging in program activities. This can include assignments, internship, research, and other related activities. This code was created because it was recorded that the amount of time that the program asked of participants was stressful on them. This differentiates between the complexity of the workload by focusing only on the amount of time being a graduate social work student requires of respondents.

This impacted interviewees because being a student “is very time consuming. More than I thought for a part time program.” Another admitted that they “do feel like it’s full time.” And one respondent said that they felt like they had to choose “between taking some down time for myself today, or not meeting my academic requirements.”

Pandemic Stress

At the time of this study, the covid-19 pandemic remains an ongoing global health crisis. Pandemic stress relates to stress that is the product of living, working, and going to school during this global pandemic. This code was created because respondents identified the covid-19 pandemic as a stressor they were experiencing. One participant said, “I’m just balancing everything in life, and the pandemic that we’re going through.” Another noted that “the pandemic started when we were like, I think in our first year, and with that just brought a lot of outside stressors.”

Workplace Challenges

Challenges in the workplace are issues that surface for an online graduate social work student in their workplace that are connected to their being a student in an online program. This code was created because issues in the workplace were identified as a stressor. One participant stated that they “had to change my employment and work less hours.”

Financial Hardship

Financial hardships are described as financial concerns that students encounter as a product of their pursuing a graduate education in social work. This code was created because financial considerations were not only a matter of obtaining mental health services (affordability). One participant stated that changes in their employment due to being in their program “led to financial stress.”

Field Placement

The field placement, or internship, is an integral element of the online graduate social work program. Participants identified the additional responsibility of incorporating an intensive internship placement into an already demanding endeavor as another significant stressor to an already stressful experience. This code was created because participants noted their internship as a specific source of stress. One respondent said that they experienced “anxiety related to their internship.”

Culture

Culture is understood in this study as the customs, beliefs, or norms of any group of people. These groups were generally described along ethnic lines. Cultural was reported as an external form of stigma that served as a barrier to participants receiving timely mental health care. This code was created because this external barrier was present in the data. One participant stated that “I feel

like I have adopted a little bit of a stigma, because culturally, if there are problems the stay within the family.”

Gender

Gender played a role as an internal barrier in receiving timely mental health care. The intersection of gender identity and perceptions about seeking mental health care served as an internal barrier in this study. One participant shared that they noticed how they had “some internal stigma related to gender” when considering whether to seek mental health services.

Family

Family is described by participants as relationships between those related by blood or marriage. The role of family perceptions about mental health care served as an external barrier to some receiving care in a timely manner. One participant stated that they did not immediately seek care because “issues should be addressed within the family, (so) we don’t talk about (them).”

Friends

Friends are described as personal relationships within the social network of a participant where the people are not related by family. The role of mental health seeking among friends emerged as an external barrier in receiving care in a timely manner. One participant explained how talking to friends about mental health was difficult due to differing views “on mental health services.”

Required Psychotherapy

Requiring therapy for all students in the program is how mandatory psychotherapy was described in this study. This code was created because this was identified as a method to provide services to online graduate social work students. One participant stated that “I really do think as a program, you know, we should be required to attend therapy.”

Integrated Services

Service integration is understood as the academic program making mental health services and resources readily available to students. This is differentiated from “required psychotherapy” in that it provides a similar level of access to students but does not mandate service utilization. This code was created because respondents identified this as a solution to providing mental health services to online graduate social work students. One participant stated that services should be integrated “into the program, so not only offering it but making sure that the students know it’s available to them and supporting the use of them.”

Direct Services

The definition of direct services was described as the program offering university-based clinicians to online graduate social work students for individual and group psychotherapy. This code differs from “required psychotherapy” in service utilization would not be mandatory. This code also differs from “integrated services” in that the services would also be integrated into the program, but that

the academic program would have “in house” clinicians providing direct care to its students. This code was created because participants expressed a desire for direct service provision within the graduate social work program. One participant said, “I think they should offer mental health services to us.” Another said that the program should “provide some sort of mental health services for its online students.”

Navigation Assistance

Assistance with navigating resources was described as a challenge when seeking mental health services. This code was created because participants voiced this as a concern. One respondent said, “if they had given me a little bit more direction on where I can go, that would have been helpful.” Another said that “I need a clear direction.”

Axial Codes

Stressors

Stressors are examples of mental health symptoms, difficult life events, challenging circumstances, or other stressful experiences that participants reported. These open codes were all viewed by respondents as a product of being a student in an online graduate social work program. The frequency and diversity of stressors reported by students creates the conditions for an axial code that captures these experiences.

Stressors in the open code portion of the data include elevated stress, isolation and loneliness, anxiety and depression, academic workload, time commitment, pandemic stress, workplace challenges, financial hardship, and field placement. Some participants that experienced these stressors were met with the challenges within the next axial code, which describes various forms of stigma.

Stigma

Stigma is understood by participants as internal or external obstacles to seeking mental health care. The data revealed several barriers that participants encountered after processing the significance of their stressors. These barriers presented as various forms of stigma which participants were forced to confront and overcome to obtain the mental health care they needed. The open codes that described internal and external stigma included culture, gender, family, and friends. Same issue as above, give definition and then expand the description using definitions of open codes included in this axial code.

Seeking Services

Seeking Services is any action(s) that a respondent reported making to obtain mental health services. Participants reported experiencing several types of stressors that ultimately led to service seeking. These service seeking attempts were on campus, off campus, and through a myriad of providers in the public, private, and community-based spheres. Multiple open codes describe the different ways in which participants sought mental health care and services.

These open codes are ultimately bisected into two groups and include campus inquiry and off campus inquiry.

Access

Access is viewed by participants as any external obstacle that delayed or prohibited the individual from obtaining timely mental health care. The theme of access is a common thread amongst multiple open codes. The matter of access to mental health services is present in the following open codes: undefined access, lack of program resources, absence of university services, off campus hurdles, affordability, limited time, and hours of availability. The combined experiences that students encounter and navigate within these open codes describe the challenges they face in obtaining services. These challenges occur due to a lack of access to mental health care both on and off campus.

Potential Solutions

Participants were asked how their university could better serve them. These responses are described in the following open codes: required psychotherapy, integrated services, direct services, and navigation assistance. These codes are all potential solutions to the challenges that respondents encountered as students in an online graduate social work program.

Axial Summary

The axial codes of stressors, stigma, seeking services, access, and potential solutions, are the overarching themes that tie each respective category of open codes to one another. These codes serve as the framework in which the

experience of these online graduate social work students can be best explained. The use of axial codes also provides the opportunity for thoughtful discussion on potential solutions to the challenges that these online students are confronting.

Conclusion

The data collection process revealed the stressors, stigma, barriers, and challenges that online graduate students faced when attempting to access mental health care. These experiences were organized into open codes that captured the individual themes that initial analysis uncovered. A review of the open codes provide insight into the types of challenges participants associate with their online graduate social work education. Connections between the open codes become reveal the potential of a predictably challenging student experience and a lack of resources and support for students as they navigate these obstacles.

Further analysis of the open codes revealed the overarching themes that bound the open codes together. These larger themes are the basis for the axial codes that have further sharpened the focus of this project. The common thread connecting the axial codes provides a contextualized window into the experience of these participants as online graduate social work students. The axial codes present as phases that participants encounter along their educational journey and ends with potential solutions in grappling with their concerns. The next chapter will discuss the implications of these data for online graduate social work students, faculty, and administrators.

CHAPTER FIVE

FINDINGS

This study provided a closer look at the mental health seeking experiences of online graduate social work students. The data provides a window into the causes, reactions, and barriers to mental health care that study participants encountered as students pursuing their graduate education in an online format. The literature is overwhelming in documenting the mental health struggles that college students, graduate students, and online students face, and this study affirms those findings.

Through an equity lens, the barriers that these students are tasked with overcoming are inconsistent with the values of their university, the California university system, and the profession in which they are about to embark. The failure to address these barriers creates an inequity between students that attend the university in person, and those that attend virtually. These inequities should not exist. There is a further equity concern when the demographics of the online graduate social work program are considered, which the data suggests skew both female and ethnic/racial minority.

Coding Analysis

The initial analysis produced the open codes, which include undefined access, lack of program resources, absence of university services, off campus hurdles, affordability, limited time, hours of availability, campus inquiry, off campus inquiry, elevated stress, isolation and loneliness, anxiety and

depression, post-traumatic stress, academic workload, time commitment, pandemic stress, workplace challenges, financial hardship, field placement, culture, gender, family, friends, required psychotherapy, integrated services, direct services, and navigation assistance.

The subsequent analysis of the open codes revealed commonalities amongst several of the open codes, and larger connections between themes revealed themselves within the data. The open codes were then categorized into groups based on these observed connections. These categories of open codes are the axial codes that bound the open codes together. The following five axial codes were created. The first is “stressors” and includes the open codes elevated stress, isolation and loneliness, anxiety and depression, academic workload, time commitment, pandemic stress, workplace challenges, financial hardship, and field placement.

The next axial code is “stigma” and includes the open codes culture, gender, family, and friends. The third axial code is “seeking services” and includes the open codes on campus and off campus. The fourth axial code is “access” and includes undefined access, lack of program resources, absence of university services, off campus hurdles, affordability, limited time, and hours of availability. The final axial code is “potential solutions” and includes the open codes required psychotherapy, integrated services, direct services, and navigation.

The dissection of the data throughout the coding process provided the open and axial codes that underly these findings. The coding process was critical, as it provided for the methodical development of the tools this study utilized to reconstruct what this author identifies as the “student experience” for these online graduate social work students. The work that went into the development of open and axial coding serves as the evidence and rationale for the entirety of this chapter.

Student Experience

The collected data suggests that the experiences of these students may be cyclical in nature. First, the pursuit of an online graduate degree in social work is fraught with potential stressors. Study participants reported stressors that included elevated stress levels, depression, anxiety, amongst others. These stressors were factors that these online graduate students considered when deciding whether to seeking mental health services.

Second, the data reveals that students are facing a range of internal and external barriers in the form of various stigmas. While the literature demonstrates many types of internal and external stigmas, this study found that students deal with gendered, familial, social, and cultural stigmas. Consequently, as these students experience significant forms of stress, they are also confronting internal and external barriers to care. Fortunately, the participants in this study were able to eventually overcome these barriers, however, they were unable to overcome

others. Additionally, it would be an error to assume that all students are able to overcome this initial barrier of stigma.

Third, upon overcoming various stigma, students are in fact seeking mental health support in multiple ways. These are categorized as either on campus or off campus seeking. And within these two domains, there are several methods students are utilizing in their search for mental health care. These include within their academic program, within the confines of the university, through their private insurers, amongst community-based resources, within the nonprofit sector, and through faith-based providers. While the options seem plentiful, this study suggests there are another set of barriers that students must overcome that involve access to care.

Fourth, as students take the necessary steps to seeking care, they encounter the next barrier to seeking care: access. When participants engage in the first domain of care seeking (on campus options) they run into lack of access to services both within the program and on the campus proper. This barrier of access to care on within the campus community is exclusively the product of their graduate social work program being online. This is supported by the data in which respondents were informed that their status as online students excluded them from utilizing campus resources.

Barriers to care continued into the second domain of seeking (off campus options). Participants could not access mental health care for reasons which include lack of access to services, costs of care, limited time to seek services,

and availability of services. This barrier impacted students whether they had insurance, followed up on community resources, or sought services through private practices.

The cycle discovered within in this data suggest that students experience a pattern of stressors, initial barriers in the form of stigma, engage in seeking services both on and off campus, and then must grapple with multiple barriers to access as they attempt to receive mental health care. Without thoughtful intervention, this pattern may continue to play out and impact the mental health and wellbeing of online graduate social work students.

Implications for Students

This study suggests that students may expect to experience this cycle as described by the author. The stressors of academic workload, field placement, employment and financial strains, and limited time to balance all their competing responsibilities can be overwhelming for some. This says nothing of the personal lives that students have. If changes are not implemented at the program and/or university level, students may continue to be further exposed to stressors and barriers that they may not be able to overcome on their own. These stressors are potential risks that can have a significant and detrimental impact on the student in their personal, professional, and educational capacities. Students would be best served if they had a better understanding of the full breadth and commitment of their program so that they could plan for potential challenges in advance.

Implications for Faculty

Graduate social work faculty can play a role in alleviating, or exacerbating, the student experience. As faculty members, they are bound by an obligation to teach and educate the next generation of social workers. However, as social workers themselves, they are obligated to teach and lead in a way that is consistent with the ethical principles of their profession. The current method of teaching and learning needs to be addressed to be more conducive to either students and the social work profession.

These faculty members could revisit the academic workload that study participants identified as a stressor and contributing factor towards feeling the need to pursue mental health care. Faculty have the power to make changes in the classroom that can benefit their students' academic pursuits and mental health. In cases where faculty are not empowered to make unilateral changes, they are still able to advocate on behalf of their students to those that have decision making power. If faculty are working in a system that is both harmful and ineffective, this author believes they are ethically obligated to advocate for change.

Implications for Administrators

Along with program faculty, administrators are also tasked with ensuring that appropriate teaching and learning is taking place within the program they administer. In addition to this, administrators are ultimately charged with the direction of the academic program and the resources and services it provides its

students. These are obligations that the author acknowledges are among the many challenges that administrators must contend with.

However, the administrators of the program are ultimately social workers as well, and the obligation to their profession remains. As administrators they are in the best position to review current program outcomes, policies, procedures, and offerings, and make necessary changes as needed. Further, program administrators are obligated to advocate for their program and find creative solutions for its students. If access and equity remain unaddressed by administrators, this will have negative consequences on the quality of the education and the lives of the next generation of social workers they are training.

If the status quo remains, there will continue to be a deep disconnect between a graduate social work program that trains future social workers to confront systems that are inequitable on behalf of clients, and the continued administration of a program that is run by social workers and fails to address the inequities within itself. The ethical obligation to address these issues awaits the consideration, collaboration, and action of the decision-makers overseeing programs such as these.

Strengths and limitations of study

This study offers several strengths contributing to the understanding of the experience of online graduate work students. The study was conscientiously designed, thoughtfully executed, and the data collection process was intentional and met various degrees of confidentiality. The collected data was analyzed from

a bottom-up approach and utilized open and axial coding to guide its analysis. Anchored by a rigorous design, this study stands upon a foundation of the best practices in qualitative research and its findings should be considered trustworthy. Additionally, the apparent limited availability of research in the mental health seeking experiences of online social work graduate students is another strength. This qualitative study is a valuable contribution to the experiences, challenges, and future of online social work education and any further research on this population may build and benefit from these findings.

A study of this nature also has limitations. A significant limitation is the small sample size in which this author had access to. The impacts of a limited sample for this study were twofold. First, interviewing fewer participants during the data collection process creates a greater potential for a lack of the broadness of responses that a study with greater resources might otherwise uncover. Another is the lack of demographical diversity. While this study was diverse in several ways, the relatively low number of participants does not provide the breadth of diversity that a study with more resources might capture. These limitations may have impacted the full scope of responses this study was able to obtain. While the findings are well grounded and trustworthy, they may not be as complete as a study with more respondents.

Another limiting factor is the ongoing covid-19 pandemic. First, the reviewed literature demonstrates how the current pandemic has brought on several stressors and restrictions on the lives of college students. While varying

over time, these restrictions include stay at home orders, remote work, virtual schooling, and restrictions on in person gatherings. These restrictions have made the process of student engagement, outreach, and recruitment even more difficult than in previous years. This is one factor that impacted the sample size.

The next factor is the inherent limitations of an online program when performing qualitative research. When students are in various stages of in-person, hybrid, or online learning, engaging these differing types of students is a challenge. However, the obstacles of reaching students that are exclusively online are even greater. First, engagement and outreach are limited to exclusively virtual methods. There is no opportunity to find and engage with this segment of the campus population because they do not come to the campus.

Another factor is the geography of the student sample. Students within the online program are not limited to residing within commuting distance of the campus. These distances can span the length of the state, and even cross state lines, which introduces the challenge of variable time zones. Additionally, the online student has competing responsibilities, and finding time to schedule with students are employed, pursuing their education, working in their placement, and other obligations such as familial or personal, is a significant challenge to overcome during the data collection process.

The strengths of this work demonstrate its merit to the field and expanding upon it can serve as a building block for subsequent research. However, this research cannot stand alone as the seminal work in this area, and future

research is recommended due to the limitations that this study encountered. In total, the qualitative research therein is valuable, limited, and provides insight into the experiences of students in their online graduate social work program and steps that faculty, administrators, and programs can take to mitigate the challenges that students reported in this study.

Potential Solutions

As online graduate social work programs continue to be developed, there is a need for administrators to consider the types and severity of stressors that students have reported experiencing. There is evidence that universities that offer these types of online options have reason to investigate whether the existing resources are appropriate for higher need students. Individuals in decision-making positions can review what supports exist and determine whether other resources would be beneficial for this special population. This is especially true for students that could not otherwise pursue their graduate education if not for the online option. These students juggle various combinations of work, internship, school, families, and other life obligations. In fact, some students do all these things. It would be appropriate for administrator to analyze whether existing services, if accessible to students, even operate during the hours that these students are not at work or internship. The traditional business hours may not work for students that cannot access services until the evening or on weekends.

There are ways to address the current lack of service availability to these students. First, the university can ensure that campus resources are offer to its students. Second, the academic program can advocate to ensure that students have these services, and others, are being made available to them. Third, the academic program could directly employ an additional person on staff to provide clinical mental health services to its students. Fourth, the academic program can forge strategic partnerships with other agencies or organizations that offer clinical mental health services to ensure students get the care they need.

Administrators can also consider innovative ideas which utilize existing resources to serve its students. For example, the program can employ interns to provide clinical services to its students. This could be done by tapping into a campus program with a clinical requirement, such as graduate psychology students. One major benefit from this approach is by creating an internship position for other university students the program would leverage the talents and resources locally available to them. Additionally, this placement would provide prospective interns an opportunity to earn their clinical hours at times that align with the schedule of an online graduate social work student.

Another method of achieving a similar end is by creating a social work-specific placement for graduate social work students from other campuses. This would not only benefit online graduate social work students, but it would also provide additional learning opportunities for other social work students. By developing these opportunities, program administrators would be creating

learning opportunities for other social workers and supporting social work education in a new way.

Similarly, there is a specific population that might be a good fit to serve these students. Administrators could provide program alumni with the opportunity to provide clinical services to current online graduate social work students. Alumni might be in the best position to serve as supports to students as they could directly empathize with the challenges that current students face. These clinical opportunities could be structured as volunteer opportunities for alumni that want to offer students the support that they may not have had. These volunteer clinicians could be scheduled in a way that are convenient to both alumni and current student availability and rotated in such a way that limit the likelihood for volunteers to suffer from burnout.

Conclusion

This study places this online graduate social work program at a crossroad in how it can equitably serve its future students. The literature is overwhelming that college students, to include graduate students, are under tremendous amounts of stress. Graduate social work programs are not an exception to that rule. In fact, these programs could reasonably be considered as greater stressors on its students when field placement and time commitment are factored in. This program, and programs like it, have similar requirements since they are professional programs. Additionally, the program content can be retraumatizing and emotionally difficult for students learning about such sensitive topics when

compared to a profession that is less personal and more abstract. Lastly, although this is a three-year part time program, participants repeatedly stated that the program workload is what they imagined a full-time program required. All indicators strongly suggest that this online graduate social work program is intense, stressful, and has serious impacts on its students.

Study participants faced myriad challenges pursuing their online graduate social work education. However, the literature and data collected in this study clearly indicates that these challenges are both predictable and require action from universities and program administrators. And there is hope and opportunity for these stakeholders to do so. This study posits that there are innovative approaches for universities and programs to leverage existing resources to better support the students they serve. If this is to happen, administrators must prioritize addressing potential inequities in their programs that serve as systemic obstacles or barriers to supporting the mental health of their students. In fact, as social workers, this author argues that faculty members and administrators are ethically obligated to do so.

APPENDIX A
INFORMED CONSENT DOCUMENT

INFORMED CONSENT

Your participation is requested in a study that will ask you about your experiences as an MSW student in accessing mental health support(s) while attending California State University, San Bernardino (CSUSB). This study is being conducted by Joseph Camacho, an MSW student, under the supervision of Dr. Teresa Morris, Professor Emerita, and Pathway Program Coordinator in the School of Social Work at CSUSB. This project has the approval of the CSUSB Institutional Review Board (IRB).

PURPOSE: To examine barriers that CSUSB graduate social work students experience in accessing mental health support(s) and resources.

DESCRIPTION: You will be interviewed about your experiences seeking mental health resources as a graduate social work student. The zoom interview will be recorded for data collection purposes.

PARTICIPATION: Your participation in this study is voluntary. You can refuse participation at any time and without consequence. Once the interview begins you can discontinue participation should you wish.

CONFIDENTIALITY: Your responses in this study will remain confidential throughout the research process. Personally identifiable information will not be asked of you. Responses will be secured on the password protected CSUSB google platform and destroyed upon project completion.

DURATION: It will take approximately 30 minutes to complete the interview.

RISKS: Less than minimal risk to you and your wellbeing is anticipated by study participation. You will be asked about your experience(s) in accessing mental health supports, however, questions about specific stressors will not be asked of you. Should you have an unwanted psychological reaction to any question, you are advised to skip the question or end your participation in the study.

BENEFITS: No direct benefits will be provided to study participants. However, MSW program staff and campus administration could make program and/or policy decisions informed by responses to this study.

CONTACT: You can direct questions about this study to Dr. Teresa Morris at (909) 537-5561.

RESULTS: Study results can be obtained from the Pfau Library ScholarWorks database (<http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/>) at CSUSB after July 2022.

I agree to be audio recorded. ___ Yes ___No

I understand that I must be 18 years of age or older to participate in your study. I have read and understand the informed consent document and agree to participate in this study.

Place X mark here

Date

APPENDIX B
INTERVIEW QUESTIONNAIRE

Interview Questionnaire

A. Demographics

Age: _____

B. **Gender:** ___ Male ___ Female ___ Non-binary gender ___ Prefer not to say

C. **Ethnicity:** ___ Caucasian/White ___ Hispanic/Latinx. ___ African American

___ Native American or Alaska Native ___ Asian/Asian American

___ Native Hawaiian or Pacific Islander ___ Bicultural or more than one ethnicity

___ Other Ethnicity ___ Prefer not to say

How would you describe experience been like as a student in an MSW program?

What has been your experience in accessing on-campus mental health supports?

What has been your experience in accessing off-campus mental health supports?

Have you experienced any internal (personal) obstacles in seeking mental health support(s)?

Have you experienced any external (societal, familial, or other) obstacles in seeking mental health support(s)?

Describe the role that being an online student has played in your decision to seek mental health supports.

What could the university do to better serve students like you?

Created by Joseph Camacho

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