
Understanding the Pathway from Undergraduate to Graduate Degrees in Social Work to Diversify the Behavioral Health Workforce

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Background

Racial and ethnic minorities comprise more than 28% of the U.S. population, yet they comprise less than 20% of the U.S.'s behavioral health workforce (SAMHSA, 2020). One way to diversify the behavioral health workforce is to explore the diversity of educational pathways into behavioral health professions. Social work presents an opportunity to diversify a large contingency of the behavioral health workforce given the profession's role in behavioral health care delivery and expected job growth of 12% by 2030 (BLS, 2021). During 2019-2020, over 50% percent of the 19,474 students who graduated with a BSW degree were from a diverse racial or ethnic background (CSWE, 2020). Yet in the same period, 52% of the 31,750 MSW degrees awarded were to white graduates and 18% of MSW degrees were earned by Black/African American graduates (CSWE, 2021). These differences signal there are diverse candidates lost along the undergraduate to graduate degree social work educational continuum

Research Questions

To better understand the BSW-to-MSW educational pathway, this study posed the following research questions: (1) to what extent is racial/ethnic identity associated with the odds of obtaining an MSW degree following a BSW degree? (2) to what extent are education characteristics (i.e., undergraduate loan amounts, type of institution, community college attendance, obtaining an associate degree) associated with the odds of obtaining an MSW degree following a BSW degree? And (3) are associations between education characteristics and the odds of obtaining an MSW degree moderated by racial/ethnic identity?

Methods

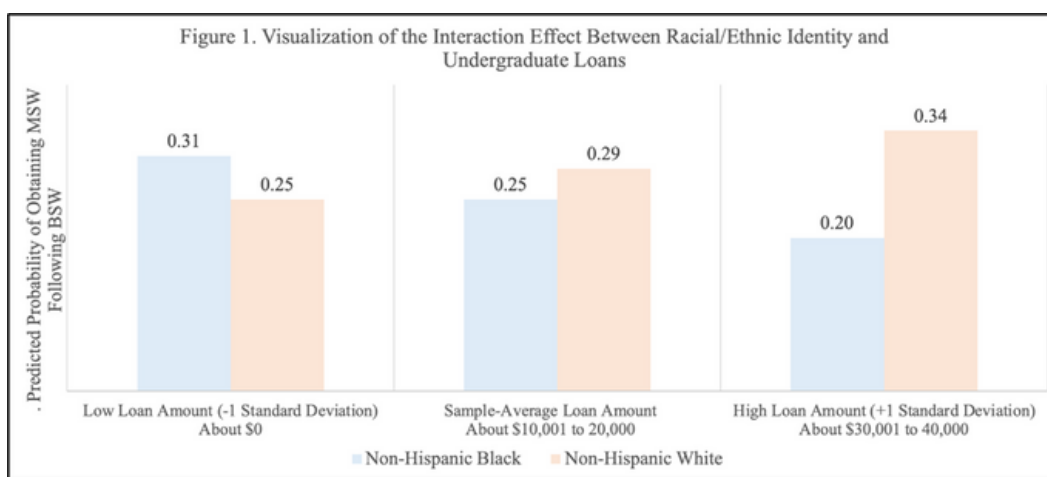
This study leveraged publicly available data from the 2019 National Survey of College Graduates (NSCG), which offers a nationally representative sample of persons residing in the U.S. in February 2019 who earned a bachelor's degree or higher in any field of study prior to January 2018. The analytic sample for this study included 538 participants who either possessed a BSW as their highest degree (n = 323, representing a population of 470,764 individuals) or possessed both BSW and MSW degrees (n = 215), representing a population of 164,459 individuals). In terms of weighted sociodemographic characteristics, 60% of the sample identified as non-Hispanic (NH) White, 21% as NH Black, 14% as Hispanic, 2% as NH Asian, 2% as NH multiracial, and 1% as NH American Indian/Alaskan Native.

Following the comparison of weighted descriptive information between participants possessing only a BSW degree and those possessing both BSW and MSW degrees, weighted logistic regression was used to examine associations between the odds of obtaining an MSW degree following a BSW degree and racial/ethnic identity, education characteristics, and interactions between racial/ethnic identity and education characteristics. All data analyses were conducted in Stata 17.0 (StataCorp, 2021).

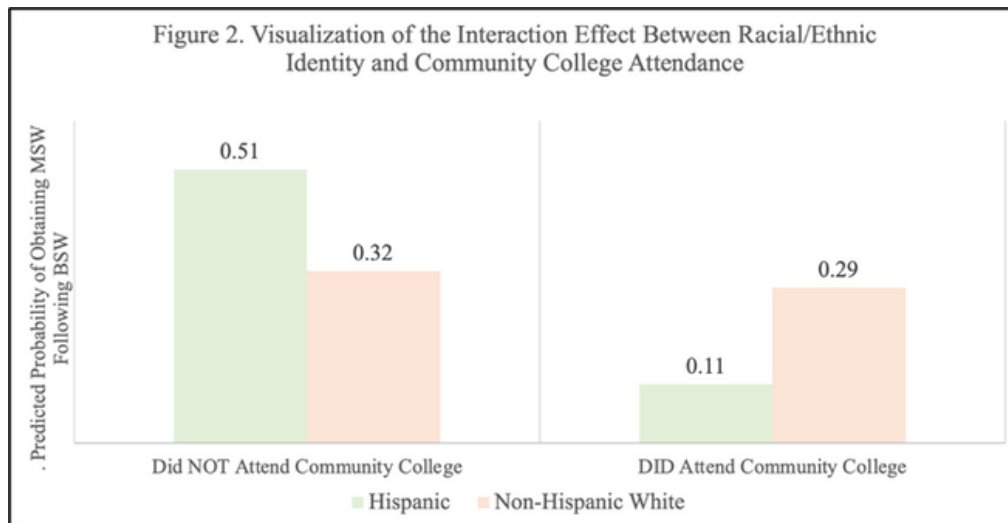
Key Findings

With respect to significant bivariate differences, individuals with only a BSW degree had a higher proportion of participants identifying as NH multiracial (3%) relative to those who had both BSW and MSW degrees (1%). Those with only a BSW degree also possessed a significantly higher proportion of participants who ever attended community college (61%) as compared to those who had both BSW and MSW degrees (46%). About 40% of those with only a BSW degree had an associate degree, in contrast to 20% of those with both BSW and MSW degrees.

Although results from weighted logistic regression did not yield a significant direct effect between racial/ethnic identity and the odds of obtaining an MSW degree following a BSW degree, the model did showcase two notable interactions between racial/ethnic identity and education characteristics. Specifically, results yielded a marginally significant interaction ($p = 0.07$) involving racial/ethnic identity and undergraduate loan amount. As shown in Figure 1, the predicted probability of obtaining an MSW degree following a BSW degree among NH White participants increased as the amount of undergraduate loans increased; however, among NH Black participants the association was reversed, such that the predicted probability of obtaining an MSW degree decreased as the amount of undergraduate loans increased.



Results also yielded a marginally significant interaction ($p = 0.06$) involving racial/ethnic identity and community college attendance. As shown in Figure 2, community college attendance reduced the predicted probability (from 51% to 11%) of obtaining an MSW degree among Hispanic participants, while attending community college negligibly impacted the predicted probability (32% to 29%) for NH White participants.



To provide additional context, weighted analyses were also conducted to assess differences across racial/ethnic identity groups in terms of the proportion of participants who (a) had any amount of undergraduate loans, (b) had any amount of undergraduate loans still owed, and (c) ever attended community college. Only 54% of NH White participants had any undergraduate loans compared to their NH Black, Hispanic, and NH Other counterparts (83%, 85%, and 88%, respectively). Only 24% of NH White respondents had any undergraduate loans still owed, compared to 54% of NH Black participants, 45% Hispanic participants, and 58% of NH Other participants. Regarding community college attendance, only 46% of NH White participants attended, compared to 67% of NH Black participants, 82% of Hispanic participants, and 89% of NH Other participants. For each variable, differences across racial/ethnic identity groups were statistically significant ($p < .05$).

Policy Implications

Taken together, the findings demonstrate how the combination of race/ethnicity and education characteristics can impact educational trajectories into the social work profession. Not only can high amounts of undergraduate loans reduce the probability that NH Black individuals with a BSW will obtain an MSW; a large majority of NH Black, Hispanic, and other racially minoritized individuals pursuing social work education are likely to incur undergraduate loan debt. In addition, the association between community college attendance and the probability of obtaining an MSW following a BSW differs on the basis of racial/ethnic identity.

Findings can help policymakers, federal funding agencies, and educators better understand when in a students' educational trajectory it is most beneficial to offer educational incentives and minimize student loan burden, all in service to diversifying the composition of social workers who might enter the behavioral health workforce. Findings from this study call for BSW and MSW degree programs to continually assess the diversity of who enters the profession, which can be bolstered by intentional and equitable considerations regarding admission processes for students with minoritized identities (Scott & Zerwic, 2015) and supports while students are in social work programs. Other policy interventions include:

1) *Investment in community colleges:* The path from community colleges to social work undergraduate and graduate education should be further explored. In this study, significantly more Black/African American and Hispanic students attended community college and as such, the social work profession may benefit from strengthening purposeful educational collaborations with community college institutions.

2) *Educational policy levers:* Encouraging entry into the behavioral health workforce via social work educational pathways may be bolstered by educational policies designed to reduce financial hardships of racially minoritized students. Policies to support initiatives to reduce academic costs and financial hardship targeted earlier in the education pathway may help reduce personal financial hardship for students. This could include loan forgiveness eligibility earlier on in the pathway (i.e., BSW degree) or before licensure is obtained, federal tuition waivers and scholarships, as well as stipends to subsidize transportation and/or housing costs associated with students' living expenses while obtaining social work degrees. These types of policy interventions may be particularly beneficial to social work students and students of other behavioral health disciplines that require clinical placements/internships, which are typically unpaid while also being a substantial component of social work degree programs (CSWE, 2023).

Implementation of these policy interventions would represent an investment into students' personal education and the behavioral health workforce. Efforts to diversify the behavioral health workforce through social work educational pathways is one way to potentially increase identity concordance between social workers and consumers that can help foster positive therapeutic and social service connections. Policies implemented at the BSW and MSW levels are needed to remove barriers students of color may face when pursuing educational pathways into the social work profession.

Funding Statement

This project is supported by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) under grant number U81HP46529-01-01 Cooperative Agreement for a Regional Center for Health Workforce Studies for \$1,121,875. This information or content and conclusions are those of the author and should not be construed as the official position or policy of, nor should any endorsements be inferred by SAMHSA, HRSA, HHS or the U.S. Government.

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