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

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Introduction

Social work presents an opportunity to diversify a large contingency of the behavioral health workforce. Differences in the racial/ethnic identity composition of BSW and MSW program graduates signal there are diverse candidates lost along the undergraduate-to-graduate degree social work educational continuum. To understand the BSW-to-MSW educational pathway, this study investigated the extent to which racial/ethnic identity, education characteristics, and interactions between the two are associated with the odds of obtaining an MSW degree following a BSW degree.

Methods

This study used publicly available data from the 2019 National Survey of College Graduates (NSCG). The analytic study sample comprised 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 164,459 individuals). 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 analyses were conducted in Stata 17.0.

Findings

Although a direct association between racial/ethnic identity and the odds of obtaining an MSW degree following a BSW degree was nonsignificant, the analytic models yielded significant interactions such that the influence of some education characteristics on the odds of obtaining an MSW degree was moderated by racial/ethnic identity. Specifically, the odds of NH Black participants possessing an MSW degree decreased as the amount of undergraduate loans increased, whereas the odds for NH white participants increased as the amount of undergraduate loans increased. For context, only 54% of NH White participants had any undergraduate loans compared to 83% of their NH

Black counterparts (weighted estimates). In addition, the odds of Hispanic participants possessing an MSW decreased if they had ever attended community college, whereas the odds for NH white participants remained unaffected by community college attendance. For context, 46% of NH White participants ever attended community college, compared to 82% of their Hispanic counterparts (weighted estimates).

Policy Implications

The combination of race/ethnicity and education characteristics can impact educational trajectories into the social work profession. 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. Policy interventions 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. Interventions might include investment in community colleges and implementation of educational policies designed to reduce financial hardships of racially minoritized students.