



Educational Pathways to Graduate-level Behavioral Health Degree Programs

Todd Jensen, PhD, MSW; Lisa de Saxe Zerden, PhD, MSW; Brianna Lombardi, PhD, MSW

Introduction

Ongoing empirical exploration of the possible educational pathways into behavioral health (BH) professions can support national efforts to bolster and diversify the BH workforce. This study sought to identify the varying educational pathways by which individuals become full-time, graduate-level BH professionals and assess the extent to which distinct educational pathways are associated with individual sociodemographic and employment characteristics.

Methods

This study used publicly available, nationally representative data from the 2021 National Survey of College Graduates (NSCG). The analytic sample comprised 1,858 participants who possessed a graduate degree and indicated being employed full time in a principal job related to behavioral health (representative of a subpopulation of 847,095 individuals). Latent class analysis was employed to identify distinct patterns with respect to the attainment of an associate degree, undergraduate field of study, and graduate field of study. After selecting the optimal latent-class solution, weighted bivariate analyses were conducted to assess latent-class differences with respect to sociodemographic characteristics, educational institution characteristics, principal job characteristics, and student loan information. Racial/ethnic variability within identified latent classes also was assessed with respect to annual salary, job satisfaction, and student loan information.

Findings

The results favored a four-class solution featuring the following four educational patterns: (a) social work (11% of participants), (b) psychology foundation and non-social work graduate degree (36%), (c) non-social work foundation and social work graduate degree (23%), and (d) non-psychology foundation and non-social work graduate degree (30%). The educational pathways possessed notable similarities in terms of gender identity, average salary, and job satisfaction. They pathways also differed in terms of racial/ethnic composition, age at degree completion, duration between degrees, and student loan burden. Assessments of within-class racial/ethnic variability highlighted disparities across all four educational pathways, generally showing lower annual salaries and higher levels of both undergraduate and graduate student loan burden for non-Hispanic Black and Hispanic individuals.

Policy Implications

Findings offer a roadmap of several viable entry points into the BH workforce. Consequently, there is value in informing prospective students that the various educational pathways featured in this study, on average, appear to produce similar employment experiences. From a workforce development perspective, the social work pathway might offer a reasonable return on investment, both in terms of graduate degree costs and duration between degree completions. However, incentives and strategies to address potentially burdensome undergraduate loan debt would be warranted, especially among racially minoritized students to support earlier entry into this pathway. Because racial concordance between providers and those for whom they provide care is advantageous, advancing racial diversity in the BH workforce should remain a priority. Potentially helpful approaches and resources on this front include the adoption of holistic admission processes among various BH-related educational programs at undergraduate and graduate levels, as well as continued funding for loan repayment programs earlier on in the education trajectory and fellowship programs and other scholarships to support diverse students.