

Online social work degree programs address diversity needs

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Community college transfer students and those with four-year degrees in social work or other disciplines now have the opportunity to complete bachelor's or master's degrees in social work through two new online programs, the iBSW and iMSW programs. The School of Social Work created the programs to remove some of the barriers to degree completion faced by community college transfer students and working professionals. Credit: Allison Sanborn

Colleges and universities seeking to increase student access and diversity may need to reexamine administrative processes that create barriers for many students and inadvertently contribute to demographic disparities, a new study suggests.

Published in the *Journal of Social Work Education*, the study examines the University of Illinois Urbana-Champaign's development of an online bachelor of social work degree-completion program for community college transfer students.

"We've seen an increase in need for [social workers](#), and we've seen in Illinois that there's been a call for an increase in behavioral health workers," said Carol Wilson-Smith, the director of the BSW program and a clinical professor in the School of Social Work.

"There just aren't enough to meet the need. This is another way to reach some of the communities and prospective students that we might not be able to reach otherwise, and in turn, increase access to social work services. The other opportunity it presents is diversifying our profession and the number of social work professionals in the community to serve the diverse needs of the state."

Enrollment patterns in the U. of I.'s bachelor of social work program reflect those nationally—students are predominantly young, white and female, according to the study. During the 2019-20 academic year, 52% of those in the full-time BSW and MSW programs and 69% in the part-time MSW program were white and about 86% were female.

Smith and co-authors Lissette Piedra and Christine Escobar-Sawicki—all members of the School of Social Work's implementation team and the school's faculty—explored how a systems-thinking approach—examining underlying structures that create specific outcomes—has helped identify barriers posed by the transfer process

and create a program that better aligned with the needs of these students.

"We want to make the transfer experience easier, more seamless and less costly. We also want to increase the number of students who have access to a four-year degree and graduate on time," said Escobar-Sawicki, a clinical professor who works with students completing MSW internships in Chicago.

The iBSW program enables transfer students with junior standing to complete a BSW degree solely through online classes and an in-person field placement in their home community—making the possibility of earning a baccalaureate degree more accessible to students with work and family responsibilities.

In addition, the school created a fully online master's degree program, the iMSW, that enables students with a BSW degree or a degree in another discipline to earn a graduate degree part-time while maintaining full-time employment.

Students in the iBSW program who attain a certain GPA and meet other criteria are guaranteed acceptance into the iMSW program as students with advanced standing. They—and other advanced-standing students who earned a BSW degree from an accredited program within the past seven years—can complete the iMSW degree within a year through advanced courses and a one- or two-semester field placement.

The online format of the programs and the ability to remain in their home communities better meets the needs of non-traditional students, who often have family and work obligations that prevent them from completing baccalaureate and advanced degrees, the authors wrote.

"We originally conceived of this as a program primarily for students who were in their final stages of community college study or were recent

graduates," said Steve Anderson, the dean of the School of Social Work.

"We thought these would be primarily [younger people](#) much like our on-campus program population. But in talking with the community colleges, we found there were many returning students as well," Anderson said.

"So it will be interesting to see as this program grows how much of our population is younger students versus returning working professionals."

To mitigate confusion about transferrable credits that often compounds costs and time-to-degree for these students, the iBSW program introduced proactive advising. Academic advisers meet with [prospective students](#) before they apply to ensure that they meet transfer requirements and advise them on transferrable coursework.

The school has also streamlined the application process for Illinois BSW transfer students through its new Fast App, eliminating the letters of recommendation, transcripts and other documents that were previously required. BSW alumni who then decide to enter the MSW program can get their application fee reimbursed.

The first cohort of nine students in the iBSW program began their studies in the 2022 fall semester. While the school initially engaged with and sought feedback from eight community colleges in the Chicago area to launch the program, schools elsewhere in the state expressed interest in offering it to their students as well.

Affiliation agreements with eight [community colleges](#), as well as other schools in central and southern Illinois, are underway.

"Now we're even starting to see [student](#) applicants nationally, and we've had a couple of international inquiries as well," Smith said.

Scarlett Davalos, a recent alum of the school's BSW and MSW programs

and a member of the working group, is the student success coach for the iBSW students. As a first-generation college student and a transfer student, Davalos said she understands the trepidations about the course workload and feelings of being out of place that transfer students may experience. She currently is a social worker at two middle schools in the Chicago suburbs.

"Overall, I think it's nerve-wracking to be a transfer student," said Davalos, who monitors students' academic achievement and cultivates feelings of institutional identification through regular supportive emails. "I hope coming in with the lens of a transfer student that I can provide moral support and tell them I understand it can be overwhelming. I'm here to be a mentor or provide that moral support."

More information: Lissette M. Piedra et al, Reimagining Social Work Education: A Systems-Thinking Approach to a BSW/MSW Program for Community College Students, *Journal of Social Work Education* (2022). [DOI: 10.1080/10437797.2022.2144977](https://doi.org/10.1080/10437797.2022.2144977)

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