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The future of online social work education and Title IV-E child welfare stipends

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ABSTRACT

In this concept paper, the authors explore online learning in social work and how IV-E education has been and will continue to be impacted. An empirical estimate of the national prevalence of online IV-E social work degree options is presented. Using Colorado as a case example, the authors share some of the opportunities and challenges presented by online education. Universities in Colorado have realized that online education connects rural and indigenous communities, reduces the need for students to relocate, and promotes a well-prepared, qualified child welfare workforce, but online options also challenge programs with localization issues. With connectivity increased and the physical location of students becoming less and less relevant, IV-E child welfare education providers need a proactive national dialogue to further assess the benefits and barriers to IV-E partnerships across state lines and the development of promising approaches in this area. The recruitment and retention of a well-educated and prepared child welfare workforce is critical for positive outcomes for children and families. Online social work education continues to grow nationwide. Now is the time for a national workgroup, including a broad group of stakeholders, to explore how the IV-E community will respond to online delivery of social work education.

Introduction

Recruiting and retaining qualified child welfare professionals is of utmost concern across the nation; child welfare agencies and the children and families they serve are severely impacted by high turnover rates and the challenge of adequately training professional staff (Zlotnik, DePanfilis, Daining, & McDermott Lane, 2005). One mechanism that states use to recruit, prepare, and retain a strong child welfare workforce is providing higher education opportunities to the existing and potential workforce. Higher education partnerships, often referred to as university–agency partnerships, help address the challenges of recruitment, preparation, and retention in the child welfare workforce by reinforcing worker competencies, providing stipends for undergraduate and graduate education (i.e., Title IV-E stipends, stipend programs, IV-E programs), providing specialized

continuing education to address local concerns, informing university child welfare curriculum, facilitating professional communities, and training leaders (NCWWI, 2013; Strand, Dettlaff, & Counts-Spriggs, 2015). Stipend programs are made available through Title IV-E of the Social Security Act, in combination with matched state funds. Social work education and specialized IV-E stipend training have been shown to predict retention among child welfare workers (Zlotnik et al., 2005). Research has demonstrated that child welfare workers with an MSW (Master of Social Work), especially students who participated in a IV-E program, perform better on objective tests related to child welfare knowledge, such as permanency planning, case planning, and management, than child welfare workers without an MSW (Bagdasaryan, 2012).

Though the success of these partnerships has been well researched, less research has been done on how the trend of higher education being offered in online and distance education formats is impacting child welfare education, specifically IV-E stipend recipients and programs. As online programs and hybrid options make pursuing a degree more feasible, it is all the more critical that child welfare considers the influence of these options on career paths so that agencies can attract, train, and retain professional social workers to child welfare positions. IV-E workforce development considerations need to reflect changes in the educational needs and modalities and the ever-changing demographics of the child welfare workforce. This article, using Colorado as a case example, seeks to set the stage for a formal national dialogue regarding what's possible for the future of IV-E programs and online social work education, as this mode of higher education continues to impact our programs, our students, and ultimately the children and families served by public child welfare agencies.

The growth of online education

In a recent report produced by Babson Survey Research Group, it was reported that in 2014 there were 5.8 million distance education students in the United States, with 2.85 million taking all their courses online and 2.97 million taking some of their courses online (Allen & Seaman, 2016). Students enrolled in a fully online education program represent 14% of all higher education students, and this percentage has consistently grown over the past 8 years. Though enrollment trends in higher education have been shrinking, online enrollment grew 9% at US-based public institutions from 2012 to 2014 (Allen & Seaman, 2016).

Online education has been reported as the chosen method of higher education for adults aged 25–50 years old (Moore & Kearsley, 2005). The average age and gender of online students were 25–29 years of age and female, with 57% of students between the ages of 18 and 39 years old (Rivard, 2013; Sheehy, 2013). In a 2010 study, Eaton (2016) found that students chose online education to accommodate work schedules, to access specific educational programs that

were not available in the regions in which they lived, and to improve skills that facilitated job promotion and work development for job retention.

Though faculty approval of online learning remained low in 2015, 71.4% of academic leaders rated the learning outcomes in online education as the same or superior to those of face-to-face instruction, an improvement from the 2003 rate of 57.3% (Allen & Seaman, 2016). In a meta-analysis of quasi-experimental and experimental studies, results indicated that online students performed the same or better than face-to-face students (US Department of Education, 2009). However, blended/hybrid education, where components of course work are completed online with a classroom-based element, continues to be rated higher with regard to superior outcomes than both fully online and face-to-face instruction (US Department of Education, 2009).

In addition to student performance outcomes and perceptions of academic leaders, online learning has been demonstrated to contribute to forming effective learning communities (Schwen & Hara, 2004; Vrasidas & Glass, 2004) and student self-reflection (Hiltz & Goldman, 2004; Jaffe, Moir, Swanson, & Wheeler, 2006), resulting in significant learning. This will be discussed in more detail later in our exploration as it relates to IV-E education specifically.

National prevalence: initial exploration of online social work and IV-E programs

As Dawson and Fenster (2015) emphasize, the 2013 Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) survey of accredited social work programs found that among 222 master's level programs responding, 8% currently offered the entire MSW program online, 51% offered part of the program online, and another 16% were developing online offerings. Of the 471 BSW (Bachelor of Social Work) programs reporting, 2% offered full programs online, 38% had online courses, and 14% were developing online options (CSWE, 2013). Just 2 years later, the 2015 CSWE survey found that 33% of programs offering an MSW program have an online component, and 18% of programs nationally have an online option and also offer IV-E stipends (CSWE, 2015a).

To further examine the prevalence of online programs and gain insight to the availability of IV-E education within those programs, we compared the list of CSWE-accredited online programs that is available on the CSWE website (CSWE, 2017) to the list of IV-E programs that is maintained by the University of Houston (Cheung, 2017). It is important to note that neither of these websites are designed to be an exhaustive list of programs, so the data generated are not an ideal measurement of US-based, accredited online IV-E programs and, thus, our comparison is likely to underrepresent the many programs that are offering BSW, MSW, and IV-E education in online, hybrid, or distance models.

However, based on our examination of the 2 lists, there are currently 79 CSWE-accredited online programs, 44 of which have an IV-E program. The programs are distributed nationally, with at least one online IV-E program in each of the federal regions, with the exception of region seven. Most of the online programs were available to students from all over the country, with the exception of five programs that were designed to meet the needs of in-state students only. Four of the programs specifically mentioned that they were open to international students.

Case example—Colorado

The Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS) contracts with accredited universities to provide educational stipends, and other benefits of the program, to students who are committed to meeting the child welfare needs of the state and its workforce. The Stipend Program in Colorado is overseen by a Stipend Committee that comprises representatives from the child welfare training division at the CDHS; Metropolitan State University of Denver, University of Denver, Colorado State University—Fort Collins, and Colorado State University—Pueblo (CSU Pueblo); and staff from the county departments of human/social service, including internship coordinators and field instructors. The Stipend Committee meets regularly to determine standard operating procedures for the Stipend Program, evaluate training requirements and needs, discuss specific student and agency needs, plan evaluation methods, and support the recruitment and retention of future students and graduates (CDHS, 2016). All committee members, regardless of affiliation, have a strong shared interest in developing a robust workforce to serve Colorado's children, youth, and families. Students who receive a stipend are required to complete a specified term of "payback"—employment in a Colorado county or Tribal department of human/social services in a child welfare position serving Title IV-E eligible children and their families—after they graduate (CDHS, 2016).

Table 1 represents a summary of the online program options found at each of the four universities in Colorado that are a part of the IV-E stipend committee and program.

These online options continue to grow and expand from year to year. Many are new (within the past 5 years) in their implementation, and therefore, considerations for additional educational opportunities are just now being considered. University staff have continued to ask the question, "Can child welfare stipends be awarded to students who are completing their BSW or MSW education online?" To date, the Stipend Committee has settled on the policy that online students who reside in Colorado, whose professional goals include remaining in Colorado and whose time frames for acceptance into the university match the application process for the Stipend Program,

Table 1. Colorado universities that offer stipend programs.

	Public or private	IV-E BSW stipend	IV-EMSW stipend	Online option
University of Denver	Private		X	Online MSW option available to US and international students. Distance learning options available in Glenwood Springs and Durango (rural, native-serving regions of Colorado). Distance learning options include some online courses
Colorado State University—Pueblo	Public	X	Anticipated for fall, 2018	Online available for many classes, including hybrid, but not for all
Colorado State University—Fort Collins	Public	X	X	Hybrid option available for MSW only (hybrid program requires 2 weekends per semester face to face)
Metropolitan State University of Denver	Public	X	X	Online option available for BSW and MSW

are eligible to receive a child welfare stipend. Questions remain regarding what missed opportunities exist. How can we best serve both students and agencies? How does this process contribute to or inhibit recruitment and retention opportunities for child welfare in Colorado and nationally?

Beginning a national dialogue

The National Title IV-E Roundtable Conference created an opportunity for understanding the implications of online education and IV-E training programs. This event is held annually to support educational providers and child welfare agencies alike. The 2017 conference theme was *Examining Efficiency and Increasing Access Across Systems Through Collaboration*. During the conference, held May 23–25, 2017, in Phoenix, Arizona, 32 states were present to discuss the many changes facing Title IV-E programs (A. Hightower, personal communication, May 2017). Representatives from the Colorado Stipend Committee offered a roundtable presentation entitled: *The Future of Online Learning and Title IV-E Child Welfare Stipends: Sharing Opportunities and Challenges*. During this session, the following questions were posed: (a) How might states and universities collaborate to offer field placements and IV-E payback opportunities that are not specific to state boundaries?; (b) What gets in the way of this collaboration?; and (c) What online education programs already exist (Trujillo & Bruce, 2017)?

Benefits of online education

The conversations from the roundtable overwhelmingly affirmed many of the benefits of IV-E online education we have experienced in Colorado and also

helped shine a light on some additional concerns explored throughout this article. These benefits are described in the following sections.

Reaching rural communities

It has long been a difficult challenge to recruit, train, and maintain students who are willing to work in child welfare in more remote areas of Colorado. Mackie and Lips (2010) report that for every 10 mi outside an urban area, the hiring of social workers is 3% more difficult. Colorado's population is primarily located in 11 counties along the front range, but 27 Colorado counties have fewer than 10,000 people. It is especially difficult in many of the rural counties of Colorado to find well-educated and prepared social workers to work in child welfare (Colorado Health Foundation, 2010).

In 2009, the National Advisory Committee on Rural Health and Human Services found that less than a third of social work schools are located in rural areas (National Advisory Committee on Rural Health and Human Services, 2009). Before online options were available, students in Colorado were forced to relocate in order to pursue an education. Stipend Committee members have noticed that after years of residing in a more urban setting while pursuing their degrees, graduates often did not want to move back to their towns of origin and could find employment at an agency in a more urban setting. Even when the committee agreed to pay a stipend incentive for graduates to accept jobs in rural areas, stipend recipients often chose not to work in those settings. One major benefit of programs being offered online is that students who are inclined to work in child welfare from a rural community do not need to leave their community to receive the necessary education. Rural supervisors reported a preference for hiring workers from rural areas due to the worker's already existing interest, residence, and livelihood within those rural areas and their knowledge of rural culture. They felt that this targeted hiring increased retention and satisfaction of their workers (Mackie, 2012; Mackie & Lips, 2010).

Collectively, we now have nine IV-E stipend students who are living in rural communities and able to access an online social work degree because of the online and distance options available in Colorado (Kathy Clark, personal communication, September 22, 2017). Online options have created access for students who want to pursue a degree without relocating (Reamer, 2013). The opportunity to study without a major increase in living expenses because of relocation to more urban areas is another dimension of access that online options provide students in our state.

Increased access—beyond state boundaries

While online opportunities opened possibilities to students living in rural communities within Colorado, it also opened opportunity to students

across the globe. Universities suddenly have students who are interested in degrees from Colorado-based universities, but whose lives might be physically located elsewhere. Students from across state lines and across the globe are now equally able to attend classes. Qualified students who are living outside of Colorado could care for aging parents, serve in the military or reside with a partner serving in the military, or pursue any number of additional activities outside of the state while pursuing a degree.

Online options have also created access to degrees for students who are working professionals or parents, who have other commitments in life, or who may not have been able to complete a face-to-face degree program (McAllister, 2013; Oliaro & Trotter, 2010; Wilke & Vinton, 2006). The ability to pursue a degree online, reducing travel time to campus and offering flexibility for scheduling, also creates access within our state borders. For many of our IV-E stipend recipients, online options have helped increased access to professional development and career advancement opportunities.

Serving military communities

There is a large military community in Colorado, which includes the US Air Force Academy, Fort Carson, and Lowry, among others. Many service members and their families might be stationed in Colorado for a few years but are then transferred elsewhere. Social work students with a military connection are currently discouraged from the Stipend Program because of the requirement to work within the state following graduation. At the same time, there are specialized units that serve military families within the state because of the unique relationship to trauma that service members and their families face. The military community's need for trained social workers and expanded understanding of trauma creates a unique opportunity for partnership with the Stipend Program. Online social work programs might be one option for students located on military bases in Colorado or potential students whose military partners may end up relocating here. Online social work programs can help bridge the gap that can exist in services for military personnel while also creating a stronger community for the program participants. One study "found that asynchronous computer conferencing [e.g., e-mail or discussion boards] can enhance a sense of community through developing camaraderie, connectedness, and sense of accomplishment among military students" (Liu, Magjuka, Bonk, & Lee, 2007). Opening the IV-E Stipend Program to talented social workers with a military commitment or connection by allowing them to repay the stipend in other states or jurisdictions may be a good idea for the child welfare workforce in Colorado and nationwide because of the unique culture of military families and how these families experience trauma.

Increased community

Another benefit that online learning in IV-E education offers is the possibility for support and the formation of specialized communities. An online community has been defined in the literature to include shared goals, membership, trust, connectedness, collaboration, social capital, and community boundaries (Liu, Magiuka, Bonk, & Lee, 2007; Shea, Li, Swan, & Pickett, 2002).

The use of online environments to form specialized communities that understand and care about child welfare may help increase students' feeling of support and socioemotional well-being due to members having shared values, behaviors, and mutual understandings regarding child welfare (Rovai, 2001). For example, students who are interested in discussing the realities of working in a small community and the lack of anonymity can find camaraderie with other students in small communities hundreds of miles away. Individuals who remain in child welfare value professional growth, self-actualization, purpose and mission, and the importance of their work; these factors are arguably more important to retention than the benefits a particular agency can provide, such as financial incentives, the work environment, and the realities of the workplace (Ellet & Millar, 2004). If recent graduates from IV-E programs see themselves committed to a cause, such as children and families, safe communities, and a purpose, rather than a specific agency, perhaps a challenge for our field is to determine how to create camaraderie with IV-E stipend programs nationally, instead of focusing on agency commitment. This opportunity to develop groups of IV-E online students who can encourage each other, support each other, and hold the vision of the importance of their work could be an untapped resource for our retention efforts post-graduation.

In addition to connectivity with a student's online community, online learning also fosters connections with other individuals, groups, research authors, ideas, larger university or educational systems, professional communities, related or diverse educational fields (e.g., psychology, sociology, public health, etc.), and society at large (Siemens, 2004). This broader connection to child welfare nationally, and potentially internationally, will foster new ideas and innovation helping to meet the demands of the workforce and the children and family served by the system.

Digital literacy

Social workers are now required to have a base level of digital literacy in order to competently do their job. Resources; paper work for agency requirements; paperwork for health care, benefits, and other public services; accessing evidence-based and best practices; and digital practice (e.g., telehealth,

text reminders, peer support groups) are located online and require a practitioner with competent digital literacy (Reamer, 2013). Learning in an online format helps prepare social workers to practice in a similar online world and helps foster innovation in service accessibility and provision for the child welfare system.

Concerns of online influences in IV-E education

While there are clearly a number of benefits to IV-E programs being offered online, there are also new challenges and concerns that these program options create. Some of the most notable concerns that we have considered to date are described here.

Federal oversight, state implementation

The Title IV-E section of the social security act allows for federal oversight and state-level implementation (Stoltzfus, 2012). Of the 2.85 million students taking all online courses, 41% live in a different state than the university or college in which they are enrolled, and this especially impacts private versus public institutions (Allen & Seaman, 2016). Because of this high percentage of students attending universities outside of their resident state, federal oversight and state implementation can pose challenges to administering the IV-E stipend. With this in mind, regional interpretations of federal regulations vary from one region or state to another, and the laws in each state pertaining to the implementation of the stipend programs may be different—if they exist at a state level at all. This program variety might include various job requirements for stipend graduates, as well as differing requirements for the workforce. These varying requirements might create challenges for IV-E graduates completing work payback and create opportunities for state-university partnerships to address and meet the needs of the local child welfare agencies where students complete their work payback.

The concept of crossing state lines is not new to child welfare. The Interstate Compact on the Placement of Children (ICPC) is a federal mandate that is enacted in all 50 states, including the District of Columbia and the US Virgin Islands. Its purpose is to comply with the goal of permanency, well-being, and safety of children (APHSA, 2013). The American Public Human Services Association has called the ICPC process "antagonizing, antiquated, and burdensome" because, while in concept sharing resources to provide better services for children across state lines makes sense, the ICPC process lacks state or federal funding but imposes federal regulation. The IV-E community would be wise to anticipate how changes in education will affect changes in preparation of child welfare workers. There are lessons the IV-E community could learn from ICPC in terms of how resources are

shared among and between agencies for online and distance IV-E stipend students, universities, and child welfare agencies. Many opportunities exist to explore how existing funding policies and procedures within Title IV-E could contribute to more interstate collaboration for students seeking to advance their education online and the programs that serve them.

Staff retention

There is a concern that stipend graduates, if allowed to do payback in other states, would leave, further complicating agency struggles to retain qualified staff. If graduates were not required to do their work payback in the state or area where they completed their field placement or education, what does that mean for staffing the agency long-term and the agency's short-term investment in the student?

In addition, because child welfare salaries vary across the country and even county to county within some states, like Colorado, there is a concern that students would not stay in the rural area where they received their degree and completed their field placement. Rather, they would graduate and then relocate to a more desirable place to work and live. Some research has shown that establishing and maintaining a professional culture with a clear vision, professionalism, and commitment is especially important to maintaining new workers in the field (Ellett & Millar, 2004). In rural places where a child welfare social worker may be the only social worker for hundreds of miles, a strong professional community is not available. (Conversely, as previously discussed, perhaps online communities that share a professional culture with a clear vision and commitment could support retention efforts.)

Another issue with regard to online education is the retention in online programs themselves. The rate of attrition for online can be 10–50% higher than face-to-face attrition rates, which undermines the mission of the IV-E stipend and creates further complications with interstate payback and the need to collect already received stipend money due to the recipient dropping out of the program (Park & Choi, 2009; Tirrell & Quick, 2012).

Quality field placements

Field placement is a cornerstone of social work education and child welfare workforce development (CSWE, 2015b). One study interviewed 20 recent graduates, and while some could articulate benefits of their coursework, all of them believed that their field placement was beneficial to their current job (Bates & Bates, 2013). The universities and state or county partnerships that are critical to current IV-E programs' abilities to offer IV-E stipend internship placements would be greatly complicated by online/distance delivery in the need to share resources, not only dollars, but time, organization, and

experience, that go into building a cohesive and consistent child welfare field placement opportunity.

Impact on tribal communities

Another consideration for discussion is the impact on tribal communities and agencies, particularly those that reside on or across state lines. Many states offer payback opportunities in their state or a tribal nation (Cheung, 2017). However, coordination among tribal governments and states requires relationship, trust, and cultural competence, which could be difficult to build from a distance (Cross, Day, Gogliotti, & Pung, 2013).

The question of how IV-E stipends are disbursed to students who reside in tribes that cross state borders and how students do their work payback within a Tribal nation could be enhanced or complicated by online learning opportunities. One study that surveyed 47 American Indian/Alaskan Native (AI/AN) social workers found that there were 7 major barriers associated with recruitment and retention: (a) a lack of AI/AN clients, (b) a shortage of field placements that serve AI/AN clients, (c) conflicting responsibilities between student obligations and family and tribal obligations, (d) students' feelings of cultural isolation, (e) the need for AI/AN role models and mentors, (f) a lack of understanding by universities of cultural customs and traditional values, and (g) racism (Cross et al., 2013). Online options might be able to reduce or mitigate some of these barriers for AI/AN students and increase access to opportunity for students living in Tribal nations. At the same time, the online delivery could also complicate the experience for the AI/AN student, and how online options are conceptualized and delivered for an increasingly diverse student population warrants thoughtful consideration.

Recommendations

Our initial exploration of the prevalence of online options for IV-E education indicates that online BSW and MSW programs continue to grow nationwide, which will undoubtedly raise questions within IV-E programs throughout the country as more and more students prepare for professional education and positions in child welfare. At this point in time, there are more questions than answers about how offering online options for social work education will affect IV-E students. The formation of a national work group to proactively explore the benefits and challenges of building specific and intentional partnerships between online social work and IV-E programs will help to promote best practices in this arena and will have a lasting impact on the recruitment and preparation of the child welfare workforce nationwide. Recruiting qualified students to child welfare careers is essential to meet the demands of the workforce, and IV-E child welfare education programs should pay attention to the national trends of education

delivery in order to be responsive to the needs of the child welfare workforce and remain an attractive choice for social work professionals.

We believe that this national work group should include, at a minimum, representatives from IV-E-funded universities from each federal region, both urban and rural; AI and AN students and faculty; students and faculty from military bases; federal administrators from the Department of Health and Human Services; national IV-E subject matter experts; and representatives from the IV-E states that rely on IV-E funds for workforce development. A natural place for these discussions to occur may be the IV-E Roundtable Conference that already has broad participation from social workers and IV-E programs across the nation. However, a future conference, or even series of conferences over a number of years, could engage a broad group of stakeholders in this discussion to develop guiding principles and best practices for how states might respond to the influence of changing educational deliveries.

Questions this group could consider include, but are not limited to:

(a) How could or should states and universities partner across state lines?
(b) How would we develop these partnerships? What resources would be needed?
(c) How does current policy support or inhibit delivery of online options in education and stipend allocation in cross-state partnerships?
(d) What changes in policy might the group recommend?
(e) How can we target locally specific worker competencies or local educational programming needs from distance educational institutions?
(f) How can we recruit and retain students when they have greater choices in where and how to pursue their social work education and where to work?
(g) What additional communities (e.g., AI/AN students, students serving in the military, students in rural communities) could online program options connect and support in way that traditional deliveries do not?
(h) Would it be feasible, both financially and logistically, to utilize other universities in different states to provide field placement supervision?
(i) What would it take to collaborate with other states and universities to provide supervision to IV-E students?
(j) How can we assure quality education for future child welfare workers in online delivery formats?

In addition to asking these questions, increased research is needed regarding social work education in online delivery formats. With the prevalence of CSWE-accredited programs offering online formats, research needs to show that these online formats are working and how. Specifically, research needs to look at IV-E stipend recipients who received their degree online to see if their

online training has the same outcomes as their face-to-face peers with regard to preparation, retention, and job satisfaction.

Conclusion

How we structure our IV-E opportunities needs to keep pace with the structure of our educational options. The possibilities and opportunities of online social work education for IV-E students are vast and are met with challenges that require our collective, creative attention. As we began exploring a national dialogue about IV-E opportunities for online students, we quickly realized that this is a new conversation for many universities and states alike. Continuation of this dialogue will require true partnerships between states, universities, and IV-E programs and the communities they serve. Through collaboration, attention to this emerging opportunity may lead to increased retention of a well-prepared child welfare workforce and, in turn, to better outcomes for the children, youth, and families that they serve.

Acknowledgments

Notes on contributors

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