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# Out on a Limb: The Experiences of Branch Campus Social Work Faculty

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# Out on a Limb:

## The Experiences of Branch Campus Social Work Faculty

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# What is a Branch Campus?

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- The National Center for Education Statistics (NCES) (2006) defines a branch (or regional) campus or institution as **“A campus or site of an educational institution that is not temporary, is located in a community beyond a reasonable commuting distance from its parent institution, and offers full programs of study, not just courses”** (p. G-1).
- Number of **branch campuses may be expanding** even as the use of online and other interactive courses have increased.
- Higher percentage of **nontraditional students** who are place-bound, commute, may be older, and strive to balance multiple responsibilities including work and care for families.

Sources: Bozick & DeLuca, 2005; Choy, 2002; Compton, Cox, & Lanaan, 2006; Fonseca & Bird, 2007; Hoyt & Howell, 2012; Knefelkamp & Stewart, 1983; Mindrup, 2012; Oliaro & Trotter, 2010; Wolfe & Strange, 2003.

# From the Literature: Opportunities & Challenges

## Opportunities:

1. **Working closely with students**
2. **Friendly environment**
3. **Autonomy**
4. **Cross-disciplinary collegiality**
5. **Cooperation** re: student concerns
6. **Greater involvement in change efforts** at campus and in community

## Challenges:

1. **Negative perceptions** from parent campus
2. **Professional isolation**
3. **Demands on time and energy**
4. **Limited collegiality across disciplines**

Sources: Bird, 2007; Fonseca & Bird, 2007; McGrath, 2012; Merzer, 2008; Mindrup, 2012; Poling, LoSchiavo, & Shatz, 2009; Wolfe & Strange, 2003

# Purpose of Study

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- Understand the **characteristics of U.S. branch campus social work education programs, faculty, and students**
- Explore the unique **experiences and perceptions of social work educators teaching branch campus students**
  - **Resident** (at the branch campus) **and non-resident faculty**
- Investigate the **perceived advantages and disadvantages of teaching branch campus students**
- **Aim to inform social work (and other higher education) programs re: challenges and opportunities** related to supporting faculty members who teach branch campus students

# Methodology: Sampling

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- **542 U.S. universities with social work education programs**
  - No database of social work education programs at branch campuses
  - Identified **89 branch campus programs in 39 states**
- **Online survey** distributed to faculty who teach branch campus students

# Description of Faculty & Branch Campuses

## Sample ( $n = 81$ )

- ***Resident at parent/main campus***  
(35.8%,  $n = 29$ )
- ***Resident at neither campus***  
(8.6%,  $n = 7$ )
- ***Resident at branch campus***  
(55.6%,  $n = 45$ )
  - Average 5.4 years
  - Half in role for 4 or fewer years
  - Also taught a class on parent campus (26.3%)

## ***Branch Campuses***

- ***Average size:***
  - 909 students
  - Half fewer than 90 students
- ***Average distance:***
  - 2 hours to parent campus (range: 30 mins-11 hrs)

# Description of Branch Campus Social Work Programs

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- ***Established:***
  - Average 10.2 years (range: 1-40 yrs)
- ***Degrees offered:***
  - MSW (68.1%)
  - BSW (56.5%)
  - Partial BSW or MSW (11.6%)
- ***Number of F-T resident social work faculty:***
  - Average 2.6 (range: 1-10)
  - 13.8% no resident social work faculty
- ***Primary course delivery methods:***
  - Face-to-face (86.4%)
  - ITV (9.1%)



# Description of Branch Campus Social Work Students

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- ***Number of social work students:***
  - Average 90.1 students
  - Half fewer than 60 students
- ***Expected social work student enrollment over next 5 years:***
  - Increase (61.5%) or remain the same (27.7%)
- ***Social work student characteristics:***
  - Older (40.7%)
  - Juggling more responsibilities (i.e., work & family) (33.9%)
  - Need greater academic support (23.7%)
  - More highly motivated (15.3%)
  - More work experience; more likely to be place-bound; lower income (13.6%)

# Thematic Analysis of Written Responses

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- **60 provided written responses** to open-ended items re: experiences in branch campus programs
  - **37 resident (branch campus) faculty**
  - **23 non-resident faculty**
- **Thematic analysis used** to identify patterns across data set
  - This approach best emphasized the perceptions of survey participants & captured their experiences as faculty members at branch campus social work programs.
  - Themes related to **advantages and disadvantages** from both resident & non-resident faculty.

# Themes: Advantages

## Resident Faculty

Autonomy & Ownership of Program
Supportive Environment
Connection to Students
Location/Close to Home
Removed from University Politics
Smaller Setting
Opportunities for Interdisciplinary Collaboration
Meeting Needs of Underserved Students
Students with Diversity of Life Experience
Motivated Students

## Non-resident Faculty

Connection to Students
Students with Diversity of Life Experience
Motivated Students
Location/Close to Home
Smaller Setting

# Themes: Disadvantages

## Resident Faculty

Isolation
Lack of Understanding by Parent Campus
Lack of Resources & Support of Travel
Lack of Collaborative Opportunities
Heavier Workload

## Non-resident Faculty

Lack of Resources & Support
Students Unmotivated & Unprepared
Lack of Connection with Students
Travel
Heavier Workload

# Major Themes: Connection to Students

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## **Resident Faculty**

- “Because of smaller cohorts, I get to know each student well.”
- “I meet the needs of underserved students.”
- “Very motivated students.”

## **Non-Resident Faculty**

- “Students are older and have more life experience.”
- “Students are too busy to find time for school work.”
- “Students are underprepared for level of work, less professional.”

# Major Themes: Recognition by the Parent Campus

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## **Resident Faculty**

- “Have more autonomy and ownership of program.”
- “Department meetings don’t address regional campus discussions/items.”
- “Lack of collaboration opportunities but same research expectations.”

## **Non-Resident Faculty**

- “University meets needs of underserved students.”
- “Lack of resources and support for faculty (advising, technology, supplies).”
- “Additional work load for those who have other university responsibilities.”

# Discussion

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- *The broader systemic problems* identified by faculty teaching at a branch campus can inform institutions on tailoring policies, procedures and resources that may better foster a supportive culture that values branch campus faculty.
- *Cultivating more opportunities for collaboration* between parent and branch campus faculty to foster a better understanding of the workload and ameliorate feelings of isolation may enhance branch campus faculty job satisfaction.
- Institutions that *develop a comprehensive menu* of faculty developmental offerings can help to build a faculty who can weather challenges and offer creative solutions (Wolfe & Strange, 2003).

# Questions/Comments

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