Western Kentucky University

From the SelectedWorks of Simon Funge

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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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WKU Regional Campuses
Elizabethtown-Fort Knox
Glasgow | Owensboro
What is a Branch Campus?

- 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.

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

• 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

- **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)

The Experiences of Branch Campus Social Work Faculty
Description of Branch Campus Social Work Programs

- **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

- **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

- **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

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The Experiences of Branch Campus Social Work Faculty
### Themes: Disadvantages

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Resident Faculty</th>
<th>Non-resident Faculty</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Isolation</td>
<td>Lack of Resources &amp; Support</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Understanding by Parent Campus</td>
<td>Students Unmotivated &amp; Unprepared</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lack of Resources &amp; Support of Travel</td>
<td>Lack of Connection with Students</td>
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<tr>
<td>Lack of Collaborative Opportunities</td>
<td>Travel</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Heavier Workload</td>
<td>Heavier Workload</td>
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</tbody>
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The Experiences of Branch Campus Social Work Faculty
Major Themes: Connection to Students

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

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.”

The Experiences of Branch Campus Social Work Faculty
Discussion

- *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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The Experiences of Branch Campus Social Work Faculty
References


References


