Virtual learning for M.S.W. allows network of field placements

Master of social work (M.S.W.) students and mental health organizations alike are benefiting from the nation’s first entirely web-based M.S.W. academic program. In allowing many of its students to pursue their advanced degree from their home community, the University of Southern California (USC) School of Social Work also has been able to build a national resource for service providers who are seeking candidates for supervised internships.

“We’ve developed a national network of field placements,” R. Paul Maiden, Ph.D., vice dean and professor of academic and student affairs at the School of Social Work, told MHW. “We identify the student’s zip code, and the development team looks for internships.”

The school established its “Virtual Academic Center” for the M.S.W. program in October 2010. Maiden said the initiative grew out of a broader effort spearheaded at a high administrative level in the university to make more distance learning opportunities available to students.

The virtual environment of the off-site program allows students to connect with their professors and their peers through live online classes, study groups and chat sessions. Classes are scheduled in order to meet the time needs of students from all over the country and even overseas.

“We have some students who are in Europe with their military spouses,” Maiden said. An already culturally diverse academic discipline now has significant geographic diversity, he said.

USC now has more than 800 M.S.W. students in its virtual learning environment, compared with 1,200 in its on-campus M.S.W. programs scattered across four campus sites in Southern California. (Information on the online program can be accessed via http://msw.usc.edu.)

Meeting students’ needs

USC’s on-site M.S.W. programs generally have about 80 percent full-time students and the rest part-time, and officials expected a somewhat similar breakdown within the Virtual Academic Center when they initiated the online program. Instead, Maiden said, they have seen about a 60 percent part-time enrollment for the online option, with the average age of students being in the mid-30s.

Maiden said the program generally is attracting a working population, with some individuals seeking to enhance their existing careers in human services and others looking for a career change.

In order to access the virtual environment, students need only a broadband hookup, a webcam, a headset and a telephone connection, Maiden said. Live interactive classes are conducted on a platform in which 10 individuals can participate at one time. The classes generally involve both a lecture and some interactive information-sharing among the group.

Maiden said the accredited degree program is in the process of developing avatars for the virtual environment, including virtual clients who will be able to bring to life various clinical presentations.

Maiden said that while the virtual environment is designed to offer students an experience absolutely equal to what they would be exposed to on one of the USC campuses, the argument could be made that the online experience is even an enhanced version of the on-site learning. For use in the virtual format, the case vignettes that constitute a major part of the applied discipline of social work have been professionally scripted and standardized, he said.

In addition, the format has allowed for the convenient inclusion of “cameo” appearances by various faculty members in courses that they don’t directly teach, Maiden said. In essence, the virtual format offers limitless possibilities for the expansion and standardization of course material.

“We have taken all our asynchronous content and we’ve created a virtual academic library,” Maiden said.

Students in the online program also have 24-hour access to their required lectures and readings, and they can participate from any location that has the needed technological capacity. In addition, they will emerge from the program with a ready-made online portfolio of their best work from the program, to enhance their job search process.

“I think these students will be very tech-savvy and they will carry that to their jobs,” Maiden said. “They will be able to function in a more high-tech environment.”

Social work concentrations

Maiden explained that the university phased in the Virtual Academic Center option by first incorporating the three most popular concentrations within the master’s program: mental health; families and children; and community organization planning and administration. This year it is incorporating its remaining concentrations of health social work and occupational social work into the virtual program, he said.

While Maiden said there are a handful of universities that offer a portion of their M.S.W. program in a distance-learning format, or offer online learning but with no interactive capability for students, the USC program remains the only fully online and interactive curriculum. This serves to benefit both the student who cannot or prefers not to relocate to California and the home area’s mental health provider community that now has access to a potential intern who otherwise would not be available in that location.

Maiden said these wider opportunities for field placements are critical for both students and provider organizations. “Field education is the pedagogy of social work education,” he said. •