



Graduate Students on the Margins: Responding to Their Challenges

Introduction – Key Questions

- Graduate students face many obstacles while pursuing their degrees: financing, family and work obligations, and academic expectations.
- Barriers intensified for students from marginalized groups as they contend with institutional and interpersonal forms of oppression and discrimination.
- Focus: thoughts and experiences of a specific group of MSW students, those who are economically or educationally disadvantaged, in order to better understand their struggles and support their accomplishments.

Methods

- Data are from focus group and one-on-one interviews with clinical MSW students selected for a HRSA funded program entitled “Scholarships for Disadvantaged Students:”
 - To qualify, students need to be economically or educationally disadvantaged, have a high graduate GPA, and an interest in clinical behavioral health in medically underserved communities.
 - Funds covered tuition costs for remainder of their MSW program and provided a stipend used to pay off part of an existing educational loan balance.
 - This HRSA initiative intends to support students who are otherwise at-risk for not completing their degree (Putney, et al, 2017; U.S. DHHS/HRSA, 2016).
- Students participated in one of 6 focus groups and in one-on-one interviews with the program coordinator (presenting author):
 - Topics included progress in the MSW program to date; particular school, work or family challenges; what they needed to succeed; and future plans.
 - Focus group interviews were taped and transcribed
 - One-on-one interviews were not audiotaped though extensive notes were taken
 - Interview data analyzed thematically using the constant comparative method

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Sample (N=42 clinical MSW students)

- 33 female, 7 male, and 2 non-binary students;
- 15 white and 27 students of color;
- 3 married, 2 divorced, and the rest single;
- 7 with children (on average just over 2).
- Average educational loan debt at the time of scholarship application was \$70,000.
- Just over half the sample were 1st generation undergraduate students (qualifying them as educationally disadvantaged)
- All but 5 were 1st generation graduate students.
- Twenty-eight students fell below the 200% poverty guideline used by HRSA to determine economic disadvantage.
- Other indicators of economic disadvantage: receiving public assistance (n=30), living in subsidized housing (n=13), or experiencing homelessness (n=20).
- Almost all had personal or immediate family experience contending with substance abuse addictions.
- At least 4 students had experienced homelessness while in the MSW program.
- All the students worked at least part-time.
- Twenty-five qualified as both educationally and economically disadvantaged.

Interview Themes

- Students expressed feelings of self-doubt and indicated that they thought of themselves as imposters rather than real graduate students:
Most days during my first year in the program, I just thought that I didn't belong here. That at some point a professor or advisor or someone in field would tap me on the shoulder and tell me to leave.
- Strategy for managing emotions was “code switching” between one’s authentic self and emerging professional self:
You know what just wears me down? Feeling like I can't just be me. Here, I have to be this professional social worker, all dressed up and polished and behaving a certain way. Then I go home, and it's like I need to become a completely different person, so my family and friends know me. It's code switching and I do it all the time. And it's really tiring.
- Students indicated that they felt overwhelmed, exhausted and invisible:
Sometimes I feel like I'm the only one who doesn't get it. I keep thinking that everyone knows these concepts, and practice stuff, but I don't. It's like there's some place that they just know where to go to find information or get help. I don't know that place. I also think I assume that I should just know all this stuff, ya know. So, it's embarrassing to admit I don't.
- Even with tuition paid for by the scholarship, students continued to experience material and financial scarcity:
The biggest challenge that I have encountered in my education journey so far is overcoming the negative stigma attached to the financial, emotional, health, and spiritual challenges I've experienced. This scholarship is a huge blessing but doesn't take care of everything. I'm in recovery and my sobriety is paramount. Being able to afford what I need for this kind of self-care is daunting.
- Conflicting family sentiments that were mix of pride and misgivings:
I was at a family gathering recently, and a lot of my family came up to me and asked me how it was going. They seemed interested in a general answer, but not so much in really hearing what I was up to. And then one of my cousins shouts – “Hey Mr. Big Shot Student, you just think you're better than us.” He then laughed, like it was kind of a joke. But it wasn't. It didn't feel that way. It felt that I was no longer a real part of the family because I was going in a direction that they didn't understand.
- Students pointed to classist microaggressions in course discussions on poverty or low-income status:
I worry because a lot of students in my classes just don't get it. They don't get how condescending and judgmental they are about people in poverty. And they're clueless that some of their classmates are really struggling financial. Some professors have been good about calling out problematic dialogue in a respectful way, but I have noticed too many faculty are passive or too silent..
- Students asked for greater understanding and support of their academic, economic, and emotional struggles:
I don't think the school really understands how difficult this program is to do. Not necessarily in terms of the actual academics. But it's having to juggle so much in terms of classes and internship and kids and work. I don't think it would ruin my learning if faculty were a bit more flexible. They say they're preparing us for the “real world.” Well, I'm in the real world right now and am barely staying afloat.

Implications:

- Focus on graduate students is unusual in the fields of educational affordability, first-generation students, and progress toward degree. Most attention is on undergraduates, which is important but does not capture the economic struggles of, and needed support for, graduate students.
- Inclusivity needs to explicitly focus on socio-economic class as a dimension of cultural identity, including:
 - Address class bias in the classroom and curricula
 - Challenge the “othering” of individuals, families and communities contending with economic scarcity as if these realities existed only outside the classroom or school.
- Faculty need to have critical and honest discussions about the work assigned, deadlines, and other degree expectations. Are learning goals truly supportive or are requirements in place because “that’s how we did our program”? How can we build in more flexibility?
- Programs need to provide support that goes beyond academic advising and engage in outreach strategies that invite students in.
- Constructs such as “profession” and “professionalism,” as well as strategies such a “networking,” need to be deconstructed. These are inherently middle-class terms and can be unfamiliar, challenging, or alienating to students from educationally or economically disadvantaged backgrounds or communities.
- Pursue loan forgiveness and similar support programs.
- The HRSA Scholarship Program was a boon for these students. This needs to be expanded and other practice fields need to develop similar workforce development initiatives.

References available by clicking this link:
<https://docs.google.com/document/d/1cPT0at03vZpOPkU5HMVtwjQsgeiW63P2D0v88ZgB628/edit?usp=sharing>