Orientation Programs for Master's of Social Work Students: Rethinking Content and Format

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Lisa de Saxe Zerden, Rebecca B. Brigham, Denisé Dews, and Heather A. Todd

Orientation programs are especially helpful to students new to the social work profession (Brunhofer, Weisz, Black, & Bowers, 2009), and the quality of the orientation students receive to graduate school plays an important role in creating a foundation for their success, academically and professionally (Hodges & Balassone, 1994). Assessing current models and content of master's of social work (MSW) orientation programming is of paramount importance to adequately preparing social work students. However, as described by Barretti (2004), the role of socialization has been largely overlooked: "Professional socialization in social work education is an area of investigation and study that has not captured the interest of most social work educators and practitioners" (p. 255). Little content is available regarding student orientation and the ways in which MSW students are prepared for academic, social, and professional facets of their careers, especially at the onset of graduate education (this is evidenced by a dearth of current peer-reviewed articles available even for this exploratory study on the topic).

While Hodges and Balassone (1994) discussed an innovative orientation program for new MSW students of color as well as ways to bolster supportive and sustaining relationships to foster success through matriculation, this "innovation" is dated by almost twenty-years. Currently, little evidence is available to guide social work faculty and administration designing orientation programs for MSW students generally, never mind the needs of specific student sub-populations such as students of color, women, or LGBT students enrolled in MSW programs. Specifically, scant, if any, empirical evidence exists regarding the design of orientation programs or what the structure of an orientation program entails more generally. Given that MSW orientation programming sets the foundation for successful matriculation by articulating the expectations of the MSW program to students, developing a better understanding of the content and format of orientation is key to successfully helping students feel prepared to embark on their MSW education. Orientation programs can lay the groundwork for early professional socialization by introducing social work values and ethics, and yet very little empirical evidence exists.

Field instructor orientation and training are formalized components within social work field education (Berg-Weger, Rochman, Rosenthal, Sporleder & Birkenmaier, 2007; Lager & Robbins, 2004) as mandated by the Education Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2008), the accrediting body for social work education. However, no comparable requirements or guidelines exist for MSW orientation programming in general. As Brunhofer et al. (2009) suggested, "schools of social work need to take more conscious and deliberate actions to socialize students to the profession" (p. 387).

Despite the dearth of information available, several studies have documented the benefits of orientation programming for MSW students. Researchers have shown that effective orientation programs benefited students through reduced anxiety levels, enhanced understanding of MSW program requirements and expectations, increased sense of confidence (Hodges & Balassone, 1994; Rauch, 1984), the opportunity to meet faculty and peers, and the opportunity to learn more about the school and available campus resources (Brunhofer et al., 2009). Given these benefits, identifying best practices in this arena of social work education and early professional socializa-

Lisa de Saxe Zerden, PhD, MSW is a Clinical Assistant Professor at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
Rebecca B. Brigham, MSW is Director of Field Education and a Clinical Associate Professor at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
Denisé Dews, MSW is a Clinical Instructor at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.
Heather A. Todd, MPH is a Graduate Research Assistant at University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

tion is crucial. Given that political, social, economic, and academic pressures are ever changing and constantly impacting the communities, agencies, and education systems students are dealing with, perhaps more than ever before, the need to evaluate MSW programming is necessary (Lager & Robbins, 2004).

This article summarizes an exploratory, descriptive study designed to identify the content and format of existing MSW student orientation programs used in U.S. schools of social work to assess what systematically is being done, by whom, and how it the orientation is presented. Study results can help facilitate professional preparation and foundational socialization equivalence across MSW accredited programs. Discussion of these issues and findings serve as an important first step in learning about and documenting current programmatic efforts to prepare MSW students for successful graduate study in social work. Finally, this exploratory effort helps facilitate a critical discussion between faculty and administration to examine the role of MSW orientation in providing a venue for early professional socialization to the field and advancing the core values of the social work profession.

Method
Research Questions and Goals

The purpose of this exploratory study was to understand what approaches MSW programs were taking toward MSW orientation programs and the ways in which information was presented in orientation programs. The study was guided by two specific research goals: (a) to identify the content offered in existing MSW orientation programs, and (b) to identify the formats and strategies used to deliver MSW orientation programs. The impetus for this research topic came from two fixed-term faculty members at a public school of social work located in the Southeastern United States which has been the flagship institution in the state for over 90 years. These faculty members were involved in the planning for this institution's MSW orientation activities and were struck by how little information was available within the literature.

Sample

In the fall of 2011, an e-mail was sent to the deans and directors of MSW programs throughout the United States; this list was obtained from the National Association of Deans and Directors and is managed by CSWE. The purpose of the e-mail was to determine whether the school conducted an orientation program and, if so, the name and contact information of the person with lead responsibility for planning orientation. After identifying an appropriate contact person at each school, an e-mail invitation to a Web-based survey was sent to 159 identified faculty or staff with lead responsibility for planning the MSW orientation programs. This e-mail contained information about the study purpose, including minimal risks and benefits and a link to the survey and the informed consent form, which were located on the Qualtrics website. Qualtrics is a Web-based survey research tool approved by the University IRB as an appropriate online tool for collecting sensitive data and has been demonstrated in social work research to help streamline the data collection process (Krysik & Finn, 2013).

Inclusion criteria for potential respondents included being an adult (18 years or older) and being a faculty or staff member of an accredited MSW program in the United States. We received responses from 74 of the 159 schools contacted, yielding a response rate of 46.5%. Although slightly less than our anticipated rate of 50% (see Table 1), a 46.5% response rate is considered acceptable and normative with online survey instruments (Rubin & Babbie, 2010). The survey was open for five weeks and potential respondents were contacted a maximum of four times during that period. When surveys were submitted, the response was labeled with an identification number and the school or university name; the respondent's e-mail was removed from the data to ensure confidentiality of responses. All data are reported in aggregate form and no individual demographic or identifying information is used because the unit of analysis is the school.

Survey

Respondents completed a 27-item online questionnaire, of which six provided demographic information about the respondent (i.e., "*what is your position or title?*" and "*What is your gender?*") A

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of Sampled Schools Offering MSW Orientation (N = 74)

School/Department Characteristics	No.	%
Type of Program Offered		
BSW	55	74%
MSW	74	100%
Ph.D.	24	32%
Other[a]	5	5%
No. of Students Enrolled in MSW Program		
< 50 students	2	3%
51-100 students	20	27%
101-150 students	11	15%
151-200 students	8	11%
201-250 students	13	17%
> 250 students	20	27%
Geographic Location of MSW Program		
Urban	33	45%
Rural	17	23%
Suburban	13	18%
Mixed	11	15%
No. Days for Full-Time Incoming MSW Students Orientation		
1 day	42	67%
2 days	16	25%
3 days	3	5%
4 or more days	2	4%
Missing	11	-
No. Years Offered Orientation Program in Current Format		
1 year	2	3%
2 years	2	3%
3 years	8	13%
4 years	1	2%
5 or more years	49	78%
We are starting a new orientation program this year	1	2%
Missing	11	-
Is The Orientation Program Evaluated?		
Yes	23	37%
No	51	63%

a Other degrees offered included bachelors of science in Child and Family Studies, master's of science in Applied Behavioral Analysis and master's of science in Nonprofit Management

dichotomous introductory question asked "*does yours school/department offer an orientation program to full-time incoming MSW students*?" The majority of questions used a multiple choice format; however, at the end of each section, an open-ended text box was available to allow respondents to add unlimited comments at the end of each section and to specify "other" responses.

Examples of the survey items included a section titled "Socialization to the Profession." Under this domain, the survey asked respondents to: "*Please answer whether your full-time MSW orientation program covers the following components. Please respond NO if you do not offer them. If your response is YES, please indicate the*

number of minutes spent on each specific area (rounding in 15minute increments)." Responses to this question included: professional ethics and responsibility, issues of diversity, leadership in social work, variety of social work practice areas, self-care, community tour of agencies, poverty simulation, or other: please specify. Another section on "Social Cohesion Building" asked: "*Please answer whether your full-time MSW orientation program covers the following components. Please respond NO if you do not offer them. If your response is YES, please indicate the number of minutes spent on each specific area (rounding in 15minute increments)*." Responses included: student panels, student organizations or groups,

meals, picnic or other school-wide social event, or other: please specify".

Results

Given that this was an exploratory study, results are descriptive in nature. Table 1 summarizes the demographic characteristics of the schools included in the sample ($N = 74$). Although all respondents indicated their school offered some type of orientation program, the number of days designated for orientation programming ranged from 1 to 4 days (see Table 1). We also found that orientation programs have become engrained within some schools, with an overwhelming majority (78%) of respondents indicating their institution has used the same content and format for the MSW orientation for at least 5 years. However, 63% of respondents indicated that their school did not conduct an evaluation of the orientation program. Among those schools that did evaluate the MSW orientation, most tended to rely on post-orientation results only.

Content and Format

In addition to the wide range of days devoted to orientation, the sampled schools also varied considerably on the content and format of orientation programs. Table 2 presents details of the types of formats used to present information in orientation programs. The content presented across these format types can be summarized within four categories: (a) academic and campus preparation, (b) field education, (c) socialization to the profession, and (d) social cohesion building. Detailed information for each of these content areas is presented in Table 3 along with the amount of time (in 15-minute increments) most frequently spent on each topic or activity.

Discussion and Implications

This descriptive study has broad implications for MSW students' preparedness for graduate education and early socialization to the social work field. Study findings help identify several themes that those with responsibility for planning and leading MSW programs should consider as they critically examine the purpose and content of the MSW orientation programs as one of a school's earliest opportunities to set a tone for their curricula, standards, and early socialization into social work values and ethics.

Reevaluating What We Do

Given our finding that most orientation programs have become engrained, established programs that have continued essentially unchanged

Table 2
Formats Offered for MSW Orientation Programs Among Sampled Schools(N = 74)

Type of Format Used	No.	%
Theater and acting out role-plays	9	14%
Simulations & case examples	21	25%
One-on-one meetings	22	34%
Tours	24	38%
Panel discussions	32	50%
Audio-visual resources	40	63%
Small group discussions	45	70%
Large group lecture	55	86%
Other responses: document attachments; 4 weekly orientation e-mails prior to campus arrival; Power Point[a] presentations; Group advising; Music	6	10%

Note: Respondents were able to answer as many as applied, therefore *n* is greater than sample size
[a] Response was stated twice

Table 3
Orientation Domains and Content Areas

Category of Content	Offered No.	Not Offered No.	Most frequent amount of time spent on this topic[a]
Academic and Campus Preparation			
- Faculty introductions	72	2	15-30 minutes
- Curriculum overview	71	3	30-45 minutes
- APA introduction	42	32	15-30 minutes
- Library resources introduction	60	14	15 minutes
- Faculty advising meetings	55	19	15-30 minutes
- Opp. to engage with final-year students	58	16	15-30 minutes
- Campus tour	34	40	30 minutes
- University health and wellness resources	38	36	15 minutes
- Writing assessment	17	57	15 minutes
- Code of conduct for students	57	17	15-30 minutes
- Entrance survey of competencies	26	49	15 minutes
- Financial aid	37	37	15 minutes
- Introduction to EBP/Research	25	49	15 minutes
- Campus resources (e.g., recreation, arts)	49	25	15 minutes
Field Education			
- Overview of field education	74	0	30-45 minutes
- Brief intro to working with clients	38	36	15-30 minutes
- Overview of field seminar	53	21	15-30 minutes
- Confidentiality	47	27	15 minutes
- Workplace safety in field	42	32	15 minutes
- Adult learning styles	32	42	15 minutes
Socialization to the Profession			
- Professional ethics and responsibilities	60	14	15-30 minutes
- Diversity	49	26	15 minutes
- Leadership in social work	31	43	15 minutes
- Intro. to variety of practice areas	46	28	15 minutes
- Self-care	55	19	15-30 minutes
- Overview of agencies in community	34	40	15 minutes
- Intro. to social and economic justice	38	36	15 minutes
Social Cohesion Building			
- Student panels	39	35	30 minutes
- Student organizations/group events	63	11	15-30 minutes
- Meals	53	21	45-60 minutes
- Other school-wide events (e.g., book swap, ice cream social.)	29	45	15 minutes

[a] time given in in 15-minute increments or range

for the last 5 years, schools need to review the content and format of their MSW orientation programs. Although the longevity of some programs might speak to their success, determining program effectiveness is difficult, if not impossible, without proper pre- and post-test evaluation markers. Therefore, MSW orientation planners should be reflective and ask questions such as, "What are the primary learning objectives for our MSW orientation program?" and "What content is the most important to include in orientation?" Perhaps the efforts of schools undertaking reevaluation of the MSW orientation can by guided by the content domains discussed in this article (i.e., academic and campus preparation, field education, socialization to the profession, social cohesion building) to help clarify the purpose and goals of the material that is included. Another question to consider is the ways in which content is delivered. This inquiry can lead orientation planners toward de-

termining whether specific content delivery methods have been particularly useful or perhaps sessions could be enhanced by exploring new, creative delivery approaches that reflect key social work values.

Program equivalence through CSWE. In analyzing the data from this exploratory study, it was apparent that some content is more commonly presented within MSW orientation programming (e.g., faculty introductions, curriculum overview). However, generally there are few content areas that all schools convey during orientation programs. Some schools have to be selective in the amount of information included, as noted by one respondent from a suburban program with over 100 MSW students who stated, "*We are experimenting with different ways of offering the info we think students need, based on the fact that students report all-day orientations are overwhelming and that they are saturated by early afternoon.*"

Related quotes revealed that institutions hold diverse views on what content is necessary for MSW orientation programs. Further, there seems to be a divide between content addressing the curriculum and content describing field orientation. Although more research is needed to tease apart the different ways in which this material is presented, it is worth noting that schools may be inadvertently creating a bifurcation separating field education from the overall curriculum when, in fact, field education should be perceived as an integral part of the MSW education (Lager & Robbins, 2004). Further, more attention paid to orientation through EPAS by CSWE and within social work education literature may help improve content equivalence among accredited schools of social work and evaluation efforts of orientation for MSW programs. While we recognize that difference in content is perhaps a positive attribute for each school depending on location (e.g. rural or urban) or student or client populations served (e.g. native/indigenous populations), social work values predicated on social justice and diversity should be included in all programmatic efforts.

Evaluation of Orientation Programming

Perhaps most alarming among our findings was that so few schools conducted any type of evaluation of their orientation programming. This situa-tion is problematic and antithetical to the social work profession's emphasis on and commitment to evidence-based practice (EBP) (McCracken & Marsh, 2008). Particularly given the recent emphasis towards EBP practice within social work and fields such as medicine, psychology, and public health, it is odd that schools of social work have not undertaken more formal evaluations and collection of evidence around orientation programmatic efforts. By embracing research and engaging in evidence-based practice as a field, social workers better fulfill their professional obligations towards clients and communities (Grady, 2010); and yet when it comes to educational socialization and evaluation of orientation efforts, this is not something that seems to be put into practice routinely.

Those leading MSW programs should reflect on whether their school has an evaluation plan in place to assess the effectiveness of the MSW orientation programming. Such evaluation can be as simple as a post-test evaluation but can also involve more rigorous methods such as follow-up assessments conducted after the first semester or first year, or assessments conducted among cohorts. These assessments can involve school faculty whose area of expertise is program evaluation. Additional research in the content, design, and structure of MSW orientation programs will aid in establishing orientation programming as a foundation to social work education and professional socialization. Moreover, a larger empirical evidence base regarding MSW orientation will likely lead to a more systematic approach to assessing how orientation affects academic and professional preparedness of MSW students.

Limitations

Given the exploratory nature of this study, several limitations must be understood to adequately interpret the findings. First, we may have unknowingly omitted common components of orientation programs from our survey; therefore, the emphasis on these components might be inaccurately represented or neglected. In addition, only one respondent from each institution completed the survey, and it is possible that data from these sole perspectives was skewed. The study also had a small sample size (N=74) as over 50%

of schools did not respond to the survey. Further, the study does not take into account any cohort information to know whether MSW programs are at all skewed by the age of their students or how recently they have graduated from undergraduate programs which could warrant different orientation needs, nor is data reflective of international MSW programs. Although full-time MSW programs were the focus of this study, the authors are aware that non-traditional programs (i.e. distant education, part time, online) that are negated from study results and further limits generalizability, and would be important types of social work education model for future research to assess. The research team not only recognizes the exploratory nature of this study but also that a necessary next step includes a larger sampling of schools with more pre- and post-orientation evaluation data.

Conclusion

This exploratory study offers a rationale for the importance of MSW orientation programming as an important component of social work education that sets the foundation for academic preparedness and professional socialization into social work. Study findings identified common content components of orientation programming among a sample of 74 MSW schools and the ways in which this content is typically presented. More rigorous research is needed to better understand how MSW orientation programs can promote early professional socialization, values, and ethics and overall preparedness for graduate social work education.

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