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# **Social Work Academia and COVID-19: The Great Equalizer**

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*Parga, Schwartz and Reyes*

## **Abstract**

There was an established virtual community of educators with a refined online pedagogy and established collaborations addressing campus-based inclusion concerns when COVID-19 stay-at-home orders required all faculty to pivot to remote instruction midway through the spring 2020 semester. To examine the experiences of existing social work faculty teaching online and faculty who transitioned online during this unprecedented time, 26 semi structured interviews were conducted; 18 of whom were faculty online by choice for at least one year prior to March 2020 and eight faculty who transitioned online as a consequence of COVID-19. Thematic analysis illuminated concerns that transcend how and when participants began teaching remotely. For example, most participants expressed desire for community and reflected upon existing faculty silos between online and campus-based faculty. The findings examine the role that school leadership can play in addressing faculty silos and work towards building inclusive, hybrid campus cultures in the future.

Keywords: online education; COVID-19; community; social work education; faculty silos

## **Introduction**

The second half of the 20th century introduced advances in technology that launched innovations in many academic disciplines including business, humanities, sciences, and social sciences. As educational institutions embraced technology and web-based learning, they were able to respond to diverse student learning needs through adjusting traditional course delivery options to include the use of satellite sites, synchronous distance learning, and asynchronous internet-based modalities, which shifted the in-person, on the main campus requirement for both students and faculty (Reamer, 2013).

During this time, schools of social work, domestic and abroad, launched online programs

which both responded to the specific needs of their student populations and matched the university mission, structure, and culture (Battista-Frazee, 2017; Supranovich, 2018). By 2019, almost half of all accredited undergraduate social work programs and 62% of MSW programs offered fully online or hybrid options (CSWE, 2020).

The evolution of social work academia involved incorporating technology into the delivery of training and education for several decades. Although seemingly simplistic by today's standards, instructors in the 1950s often used audio-visual technology; the 1980s brought computers to the social work classroom; and the 1990s introduced computer-assisted instruction for classroom enhancement as well as technology for remote learning (Kurzman, 2019; Shorkey & Ubel, 2014). Today's advances have resulted in innovations for education delivery and online learning experiences for remote students, revolutionizing the reach and delivery of social work theory, education, and practice.

As the demand for online social work education increased, concerns about its effectiveness emerged. Research examining academic rigor and quality, student learning outcomes (SLOs), retention, and satisfaction found few differences between campus-based programs and programs delivered online (Afrouz & Crisp, 2020; Cavanaugh & Jacquemin, 2015; Cummings et al., 2015; Kurzman, 2019; Parga et al., 2019; Vivolo, 2016; Wretman & Macy, 2016; York, 2008). Other streams of inquiry focused on ethics, accessibility, and ability to meet the needs of a remote student body (Jensen, 2017; Levin et al., 2013; Reamer, 2013; Zidan, 2015) as well as the experiences of community from both the instructor and student perspectives (Berry, 2017; George et al., 2019; Jewell et al., 2019; Phirangee & Malec, 2017; Schwartz et al., 2016).

Technology adoption in social work education paralleled other disciplines, with distance learning

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options becoming mainstream by the early 2000s (Coe Regan, 2016; Kurzman, 2019; Reamer, 2019). The adoption of online programming in social work education faced barriers, including resource acquisition to develop online programs and adopt new teaching pedagogies. One of the biggest adoption barriers discussed in the literature involved skepticism of faculty and administration, which produced resistance to building and launching web-based learning opportunities (Bentley et al., 2015; Kurzman, 2019; Vivolo, 2016; Wretman & Macy, 2016).

### **COVID-19 Pandemic**

The Severe Acute Respiratory Syndrome Coronavirus SARS-CoV-2, COVID-19, is a rapidly-spreading coronavirus that led to more than 29.2 million cases of COVID-19 and nearly 532,355 deaths in the United States by March 15 of 2021 (Centers for Disease Control and Prevention [CDC], 2021; Toquero, 2020). In response to the COVID-19 pandemic, educational institutions were forced to comply with mandatory shelter-in-place orders which required rapid transition of students, faculty, staff, and courses to operate online, which, in some cases, was not a choice the institutions was prepared to make (Kandri, 2020). In the United States alone, approximately ten million students transitioned to online learning with an estimated 750,000 to one million faculty impacted (Johnson et al., 2020).

Schools of social work nationwide faced additional challenges associated with the unplanned transition to online education. The unprecedented COVID-19 crisis strained existing student field placements and confirmed the interdependent relationship that schools of social work have with field placement sites (Dempsey et al., 2021). Additionally, faculty who had previously eschewed teaching online had to rapidly adapt during a period of crisis in both their personal and professional lives (McCarthy et al., 2021; McMurtrie, 2020).

This paper presents findings from interviews formally collected from eighteen social work faculty who were already teaching online prior to the COVID-19 pandemic and eight social work faculty who transitioned to online and remote work as a result of COVID-19. Three themes emerged from the interview data, which elevated the per-

spectives of both faculty who were online prior to the pandemic and those who were required to pivot. Data analysis suggests the pandemic requires the implementation of unique strategies to collaborate and for leadership to bridge the separation between campus-based and online faculty. Implications for future research and practice are considered.

### **Method**

The initial study scope explored instructor motivation for pursuing an online social work teaching position and individual experiences in remote work. A cross-sectional case study received approval from the Our Lady of Lake University Institutional Review Board in 2019 and individual interviews began in early 2020. Non-probability convenience and purposive sampling strategies were utilized to recruit social work faculty who had taught online for a minimum of one year and did not have a dedicated office on campus due to their remote status. By March of 2020, 18 semi structured interviews consisting of eleven questions with optional probing questions listed in Table 1 were completed utilizing Zoom and brought perspectives from four schools of social work.

In May 2020, with COVID-19 requiring all faculty to move to online instruction, the authors interviewed an additional eight social work faculty who were considered campus-based faculty and included additional prompts to explore their rapid transition to online education. Demographics of faculty who chose online instruction prior to COVID-19 and faculty who moved online because of COVID are detailed in Table 2.

Analysis of all twenty-six interviews adhered to a narrative approach. The first two authors independently read five randomly selected transcripts to build an initial codebook in a Google doc of 23 codes. Collaborating on Zoom in two analytic seminars, the authors collapsed the initial codebook into nine broad themes that were subsequently confirmed by the third author. Interviews and codes were entered into Dedoose, a web-based qualitative analysis application, and an interrater reliability kappa coefficient of .60 was deemed acceptable through the Dedoose “interrater reliability test” function. With adoption of

the final nine themes, the research team collapsed the codes into the three noteworthy areas addressed in this paper: (a) characteristics of faculty teaching online prior to COVID, (b) feelings of inclusion, and (c) COVID-19 as an equalizer between two cultures.

## Results

### Theme 1: Faculty Teaching Online Prior to COVID-19

The development of online social work education has elicited diverse responses from the social work professoriate ranging from curiosity to overt resistance. In order to understand the landscape of social work academia prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, it is necessary to examine the characteristics of those who welcomed technology into their pedagogy and career path prior to COVID-19.

Eighteen faculty shared their motivating factors for accepting a remote faculty position and expressed both intentional and opportunistic reasons. One participant shared that “it just kind of happened, and I am very glad it happened.” Other participants echoed an opportunity to transition online emerging at the right time. “It was really this...serendipitous moment,” reflected one participant. Another mid-career academic shared that:

The timing was perfect because it was X [who] called me. I had sent in my resume because I saw something in the NASW Journal. You know they were looking for a field faculty and things like that. So I sent my resume and she just happened to call me and asked me if I wanted to start teaching.

Others highlighted the benefits that remote work provides, particularly the ability to reduce costs associated with travel to campus, as evidenced by the following comment: “I almost paid half of what I would make in tolls and parking to get to my local university, and it was not an hour commute each way.”

Some participants appreciate telecommuting flexibility; as one respondent gushed, “I love this. I love the flexibility.” Others appreciate having the time and space to pursue volunteer work in

their local communities, “being able to do things during the day and not lose time [due to being on campus all day].” This was particularly true for those living a far distance from campus: “I stayed [a remote worker] because I love the quality of life.” Another participant reflected that “it allows me to sort of do my life the way that I need to, still be engaged in learning, and still be engaged in the classroom, so to speak.” Another shared:

At my stage in life, [I] wanted to be home, relationship wise and things like that ... I'm very active in my community... I'm on a commission for the city government. I volunteer with a couple of different organizations. So the flexibility of this type of work means I can really embrace my community work and be there for that.

Others welcomed the freedom that remote work provides for travel while also maintaining a full-time appointment; as one respondent noted, “When I wasn't living here, it was helpful because I could still work for the university and live in different countries at the time.” Others appreciate the flexibility for caregiving responsibilities. As one participant with two young children shared, “I have a five-year-old, a three-year-old, and an essential worker husband and...we have become very accustomed to the flexibility that comes along with being remote.” Another remote faculty expanded caregiving responsibilities from young children to include aging parents:

To be honest ... I have older parents... And so being able to work from Chicago is amazing! Anytime that there's been positions on ground I've chosen not to interview because I do like the quality of life and being able to see family.

Novelty and being a part of something new were other drivers for early adoption. Some appreciate seeing themselves as an innovator and reflected they pursued online education in order to develop a new skill set. One mid-career faculty related that:

It has given me a whole new challenge, a whole new set of skills to build. Well, not a whole new set because I had a pretty good set, but it allows me to augment things that I already did and figure out ways to do this well,

because I feel like I did it well in the class room.

Similarly, another participant with four children under the age of thirteen shared how she approaches her professional life:

[I've] always approached my career with a you know say yes to anything that looks new and interesting so...so I was like, why not? So I applied and I really didn't know like I didn't have a clear picture in my head [of online education]. How are you going to teach social work practice in an online setting?

It is noteworthy that the faculty interviewed came to their positions with a tremendous amount of experience as faculty in social work education. Years of experience in academia ranged from seven to 25 years, reflecting a diverse blend of knowledge, skills, and pedagogical expertise. These faculty chose to pursue careers in academia, specifically opting to teach social work courses through online modes of instructional delivery, as explained by one late-career participant:

When I retired from Japan, I had actually been teaching online since 2008 and I wanted to teach online. That was really my primary - when I retired my primary thing is, I want to do something online because we were going to move here to [my city] and so that was my primary drive. I wanted to work at home.

The main difference between faculty teaching online prior to COVID and faculty who transitioned because of COVID were the conditions under which the change occurred. Faculty who were forced to transition because of COVID endured extreme stress detailed by one respondent as "elements of loss and grief." There was not an element of curiosity, but fear, as detailed by one participant: "Several [campus-based faculty] were very scared... that they would not be able to have the relationships they wanted to have with the students...they were afraid it would 'strip the soul' out of the work that they do by going online."

However, there were also realizations about some of the benefits. One person reflected that the removal of their commute to and from campus

increased their productivity: "I'm weirdly more productive because I'm not driving an hour and 20 minutes a day ... it is so much easier to...be more efficient and get more work done by not having to schlep all over town." Others recognized that they are more open to teaching online in the future: "Not that I want to trivialize the awfulness of the situation... but... I'm kind of delighted... I wish it weren't so sudden and sort of in a dramatic way, but I kind of think it's the future." Additionally, this experience provided a type of professional development:

Even though it's had its challenges, it was actually very helpful because it strengthened areas that I ultimately need us to grow in...We need to be able to learn how to navigate an online teaching platform...so it forced me to do that and...it's making me a lot more comfortable.

Regardless of faculty characteristics and opportunities identified by working remotely, themes consistently mentioned by both samples were the isolation they felt and a yearning for community and connection with their colleagues.

## **Theme 2: Inclusion**

### ***Inclusion Challenges***

Despite the fact that over half of accredited social work programs had adopted some form of online learning prior to 2020, faculty who accepted online remote teaching positions geographically separated themselves from other faculty, administration, and the university community. The current sample echoes research on remote faculty feelings of isolation from individual colleagues and the school as an organization. This is particularly the case for faculty who are geographically far away from the university campus, preventing in-person attendance at meetings or events such as graduation. One participant, who taught online for nine years prior to COVID-19, explains:

I think that the biggest challenge was staying connected to...or getting to know my colleagues. I didn't know anyone in my university. I hadn't spent any time on the university campus. I didn't, you know, go to graduate school there. I just...had no relationships. And

while the remote teaching wasn't problematic, feeling part of the academic community and having colleagues who became friends was challenging...you have to spend some time figuring out the culture and climate and power dynamics by observing people in their work habitat. And when your meetings are online and agenda oriented, it's really hard to get to know somebody that way.

Another pre-COVID-19 online adopter who taught online for both the military and a school of social work similarly summarized his experiences:

I think you get a lot of social isolation...You feel very disconnected from the faculty and you don't know what's going on, and when you don't know what's going on, when you're a little neurotic, like myself, you start making stuff up.

Some noted challenges building relationships between campus-based and other remote faculty. One faculty member with campus-based and online experience shared his perspective:

If you know them, you're good. If you don't know them, there's no relationship at all...I have a few relationships that I've been able to foster when I was actually [on campus] and I made some good relationships, and those relationships continue.

Another person identified challenges with determining the roles, formal and informal, other faculty perform in the school. While she noted that this has changed over time, her isolation from main campus and in-person interactions created barriers for navigating the system.

I definitely feel disconnected ... I do not really have a concept of who does what and what role they are in. So sometimes, it takes me a little while being isolated and not connected to the university.

Perspectives from the final eight faculty with ground appointments who transitioned online because of COVID-19 reveal challenges that correspond with those already online, although they were already familiar with school administration procedures. Challenges related to rebuilding and

maintaining a sense of community online are notable. While most of these individuals had opportunities to build campus-based relationships prior to the COVID-19 pandemic, these relationships did not necessarily translate easily into the virtual environment. One field faculty shared their observation that the origin of a relationship appears to make a difference in its transferability:

In our office XXX, there were maybe four or five of us...You know, even trying to recreate that over text it is not the same. What's interesting is that those relationships that started [in person] seem harder to keep up virtually, whereas the relationships that I had with the people online that began online seem to be less affected, which is kind of interesting. That, like, the origin of the relationship seems to matter.

Navigating administration and campus-based programs was a challenge that faculty already online frequently mentioned and is reflected in the narratives of post-COVID-19 faculty. As one faculty teaching online prior to COVID-19 noted, "Just figuring out the whole payroll and HR system as virtual faculty was very complicated in the beginning when, if I had been on campus, I could have just wandered into someone's office." Another traditional campus-based faculty hopes that her school will adopt new protocols that improve the ways that remote workers can connect with HR and finance departments:

I have been at [school] for 11 years and there's so many things where it is like 'oh, no, this requires a 'wet' signature' and so I have literally driven to campus in the rain because something is due and needs my signature. And now, that is not needed anymore. Everything is in Adobe Sign, overnight. So, that has been a great benefit all of a sudden, we can do every thing online and no one is arguing about 'oh, no, this needs a wet signature'.

### **Solution Oriented Inclusion Strategies**

As a result of feeling isolated and disconnected from colleagues and the wider school community, faculty already online had developed strategies to have a sense of community and collaborate with their colleagues. One participant shared her experiences with virtual faculty who inten-

tionally schedule “serendipitous” opportunities for connections to occur: “[Those] who want to build collaborations and connections with their colleagues are going to create opportunities or take opportunities provided to them like the Virtual Water Coolers or different things to make it happen.”

Some respondents identified that leadership played a key role in whether or not geographically distant faculty had opportunities for inclusion. One participant reflected that “when I’m in the non-tenure track faculty meetings, I’m very much included and that’s because of the leadership of the person who is in charge of the non-tenure track faculty...[when] I’m in the large faculty council meetings, nobody even knows I’m there.” Another respondent echoes this sentiment, arguing that leadership is key for inclusion:

I think that the thing that would make a difference, more than anything else is having a director who recognizes online as legitimate and equal to on the ground and also within that larger, you know, acknowledgement, [who] acknowledges the remote faculty and that they are providing the same services on the ground. So, it really starts with the top, in my view, that is what it would take.

Participants mentioned audio and visual utilization as being the most impactful for meeting inclusion, and particularly essential to relationship building. Faculty already online reported that their attendance at faculty meetings initially had “no camera access and now chat boxes are not allowed anymore.” Protocols such as this discouraged engagement and fostered a sense of disconnection from campus-based colleagues and remote faculty required to attend the meeting. Another mentions: “I just kind of feel like a fly on the wall. I know that, like we could type in questions [to the chat box]. So if there was ever anything that I really needed to say, I would just type it in, and it would be addressed that way. But when there is 75 people on the call, I am not sure that that is really beneficial for anybody that is on there.”

One fully virtual employee strived to overcome the exclusion of non-campus-based students and faculty through making requests for access to

campus events and opportunities. She describes herself as a “squeaky wheel” and shared:

We would get an email about a really great presenter coming to campus and they are going to be so amazing, and you should really come to it. And I always...myself and a few other colleagues...reply back and say ‘Awesome, where’s the Zoom link? How are we going to join?’

Both sets of faculty recognize that, in many cases, silos existed between traditional campus-based and remote online faculty. These divisions often occurred naturally as a result of not sharing physical space on campus. It is not surprising that faculty who shared space on campus built community and those who shared virtual space built their own separate community when utilizing social work’s Person-in-Environment perspective. As one participant with close to a decade of remote teaching experience reflected:

Our school had a long-time campus-based faculty who had been working there for many years, non-tenure track and tenure track faculty, administration and many of those people did not want to teach online. They were resistant to teaching online; they just did not want to do it. So our school had to hire people who wanted to do it...So that kind of automatically created these two separate cultures. You had the group that had been working on the ground who did not want to teach online. And then you had the group of early adopters.

A field faculty who has worked both on campus and now remotely detailed her experiences of these silos:

In our school culture like it's not until now until COVID people were forced to accept online, and I'm not even saying that they are accepting it. What we have right now is that there is an ‘us and them’ mentality a lot. And ‘us’ being ground, ‘them’ being online, ‘us’ being clinical teaching faculty, ‘them’ being field.

In some cases, the outcomes of these silos serve as barriers for collaboration on research or curriculum development. One mid-career faculty reflected on his experiences working with a cam-

pus-based faculty on course development: “If we were together we could have these discussions, but instead we have lead faculty who are in the silos who have no discussions with other people. There is no sense of this... coming together.” This “us vs. them” mentality is evidenced in interviews with faculty already online who report building strong relationships with their virtual colleagues. As one person reflected:

I find my relationships are much more meaningful with remote work. I find that the desire to be transparent in terms of our capacities. Like you know what, I am to the max right now, you know, I can't take them. Or like, you know, I'm really struggling right now...I've never had that as much as I do now... I don't know if that is inherent to remote work because we want those connections or if it's just, I happen to be working with really great people.

Even campus-based faculty now working remotely and teaching online for a relatively short amount of time have already acknowledged missing connections with colleagues and operating in silos. One participant identifies how much she misses informal interactions with her colleagues:

When this is over, we'll go get a drink, you know, like I miss it... And that may be different from [virtual] folks because you're not always together. But for us, you know, it is the hallway conversations... being in rooms together... it is something important to me.

Another faculty member reflected on the silos that existed before COVID-19, offering that, “I think that was something that we had to work out, how to...how to kind of work together with a campus and an online program and to kind of collaborate as opposed to see each other as competition.”

### Theme 3: COVID as the Great Equalizer

The silos between faculty that existed prior to COVID-19 blurred as all social work faculty found themselves working remotely. Over the course of a few days entire schools of social work pivoted online with instructors, students, administrators, and organizational leaders having to grapple with a new, remote identity—coincidentally

an identity that they may have refuted before. One campus-based faculty member noted the rapid turn around and the complexity of the moment:

We had classes. We were there in person. And at like about 6:30pm that night. We all got the email that was like okay do not come to campus tomorrow. So, like, if it were not a pandemic and that was just happening for just whatever reason, that would be already really a lot, right? And like, oh, and you get three days to get your [online] classes ready and then Monday we are starting back virtual!

Universities had to rapidly examine their existing resources, teaching capacity, communication, and distribute technology to their faculty to operate in a remote capacity. Some schools represented in these interviews adapted better than others did. One participant reflected that “our institution has been amazing! I could go to a different workshop every day about some kind of faculty development thing,” while another shared:

I do not think anything was able to prepare us to transition that quickly. There [is] training... but it is a six-week course. So I was learning after the fact. Because it was like we were meeting once a week, but classes were already well into the pandemic world.

Key concerns raised by campus-based faculty transitioning to remote work and teaching online were access to reliable technology, connection, and linkage support, something that many faculty who were already online had been requesting for years. Addressing these concerns was paramount now that all faculty and administration had the same remote status.

Faculty who transitioned online in March 2020 faced many challenges with internet connectivity as well as learning how to prepare for and manage a virtual classroom. One participant shared feeling overwhelmed about being in class: “How do you respond to chats, continue the lecture, share the screen, move from one item to another and kind of maintain a focus on delivering the key points?” Others note issues with developing a new teaching strategy while also finding appropriate lighting and space inside of their homes, where other family members were also sheltering



in place. One father of a young son recalls that before COVID-19—

“I had a classroom setting that I know...I have all the resources there; to now, it's like shoot, I have to find a space at home to [teach class], uninterrupted without my son thinking that I have the day off.”

Participants shared that meetings created spaces where leadership had an opportunity to be inclusive, build community, and break down silos. One faculty member online prior to COVID-19 offers that these opportunities were not always utilized, noting “sometimes I would attend meetings online and would feel like I didn't even exist in the meeting,” while another newly virtual instructor with a long history of teaching on campus reflected that:

I get notifications that say, hey, faculty meeting coming up. But there is no way for me as an adjunct to Zoom into the meeting. Do you see what I'm saying? So, if they were to provide an open access sort of scenario for people to zoom in and just listen, that would be critical and building the community, I think.

It is worth noting that even though the data collection from campus-based faculty transitioning online occurred only a few months into the pandemic, many of the respondents recognize this situation existed prior to the pandemic. One participant reflected on a pre-COVID meeting: “It was hard when we were all in a [physical] room and then you guys are [up] on a screen in boxes. This way [all on Zoom], we are all in boxes and there's an equalizing thing to that.”

Faculty already online had already experienced the challenges of remote work and teaching online and as a result had created solutions to navigate them. Solutions included identifying specific technology needs for more meeting inclusion, developing essential university structures, or pinpointing ways for leadership to bridge silos, elevate online learning, and build unity between all faculty.

Both historically ground-based and online faculty reflected that they could learn from each other and share lessons for building community and connectedness online. Faculty who were already

online prior to COVID were able to validate and support faculty transitioning to their virtual environment and introduce lessons learned to leadership to support a successful transition. One faculty member online prior to COVID-19 shared that she has worked to “reassure the faculty that haven't done this that you can still have those intimate relationships with your colleagues and your students. And, you know, it still works, but I think that they have to experience it.” A traditionally campus-based faculty shared similar sentiments, reflecting how helpful it is to feel supported by those who have successfully worked virtually: “Hearing from the colleague, you know, who is a [virtual] person and getting that guidance has been really helpful...the personal touch that has come from faculty to faculty has been invaluable.”

## **Discussion**

There are several precedents to consider for the temporary emergency transition of courses to online environments, including Hurricane Katrina, the 2011 earthquakes in New Zealand, and the university shutdowns in South Africa in 2016 (Johnson et al., 2020). Lessons learned from these instances of emergency remote education focused on the need to attend to the various stakeholders, including students, staff, faculty, and administrators (Johnson et al., 2020). This paper uncovers lessons learned from another emergency, the COVID-19 pandemic, a crisis requiring social work academia to transition one hundred percent of its programming online for an undetermined length of time. This situation has introduced a unique opportunity to examine social work's complicated history with technology and consider new pathways for the future.

Two decades of literature examining the adoption of technology in social work education has focused on three key areas, with the first concerning skepticism about education quality and student outcomes (Afrouz & Crisp, 2020; Cavanaugh & Jacquemin, 2015; Cummings et al., 2015; Forgey & Ortega-Williams, 2016; Kurzman, 2019; Wretman & Macy, 2016). A second stream of literature focuses on technology adoption and, in some cases, resistance to it (Bentley et al., 2015; Berry, 2017; East et al., 2014; Hill-Jones, 2015; Jewell et al., 2019; Reamer, 2019; Wolf & Goldkind, 2016). The third area of in-

quiry focuses on the social isolation of remote faculty and challenges building connections and community with campus-based faculty (Parga et al., 2018; Phirangee & Malec, 2017; Schwartz et al., 2016; Schwartz et al., 2018; Smith, 2015).

This paper introduces interview data examining the experiences of social work faculty who voluntarily adopted online modalities pre-COVID and those who transitioned online because of COVID-19. Circumstantially, two-thirds of the participants interviewed were open to technology and accepted remote teaching appointments while the other third represent faculty who, prior to March 2020, had little to no interest in online education. Because of fortunate timing, the data presented in this paper offer a unique window into the perspectives of a small sample recruited several months prior to COVID-19 and another several months after. Interestingly, data analysis reveals that respondents did not stray far from what has been written about the adoption of technology in social work education. A refreshing theme that emerged from the 26 interviews was the potential that a global pandemic could “level the playing field,” facilitate simultaneous communication, and ignite collaboration among faculty regardless of their teaching location or pedagogy.

The COVID-19 pandemic also demanded institutions address university level gaps in technology access and adoption and dedicated overdue attention to all remote faculty in need of updated technology and remote campus access to programs and services. Those who were online pre-COVID had made considerable investments of time to research to build their online educational pedagogy and integrated best practices grounded in education research and theory, with identified tools for the promotion of student engagement and retention, as well as professional training for faculty (Johnson et al., 2020; Kandri, 2020). Data from this study suggest that, given the opportunity, the practice knowledge of faculty with experience online in combination with university resources can facilitate successful transitions online of even the most skeptical faculty.

All participants expressed feelings of social isolation and exclusion as remote faculty. Those who were teaching online prior to COVID acknowledged their feelings of disconnect and

alienation but also noted strategies that had seemingly been built bottom-up for community and relationship building in virtual environments, i.e., a Virtual Water Cooler, utilizing apps, or group text. Long-time online participants felt compelled to strategize in order to meet their community-building needs, whether it be finding a way to join a campus-based committee or communicating with human resources. Despite the silos widely discussed in the interviews, the campus-based faculty additionally expressed respect for faculty who were online prior to COVID and their ability to navigate virtual academia and gratitude when they were willing to share their lessons learned.

Participants emphasized the vital role that leadership performs in building inclusive environments for all faculty. Organizational leaders set the tone and, unfortunately, the tone prior to COVID-19 participated in the creation of silos within individual schools and across the social work profession. The authors suggest that the COVID-19 pandemic has hatched an opportunity for change. Interviews with faculty who transitioned online due to COVID-19 highlight how some faculty who were already online served as mentors and leaders in the rapid transition to online education in early 2020. This is of particular importance as it recognizes the wealth of knowledge that existing online faculty can provide social work educators, including experiential learning, practice knowledge, technology and tools for classroom learning, student engagement activities, and strategies for building and leading virtual workgroups and teams.

Shelter-in-place requirements as we currently know them will eventually end, and university leaders will need to begin another complicated discussion about how and when to transition back to campus-based learning. This is a daunting and unique time globally to be in higher education, particularly for those in educational policy development (Harris & Jones, 2020; Sull et al, 2020). With unknown return dates, administrators are already creating stopgap policies, budgets, online pedagogy, and reevaluating the support students will need in a vaccinated COVID world (Gardner, 2020). Institutions adopting new remote-accessible services and courses should prepare for

an increase in student demand for quality online programs and courses now that learners have experienced the convenience and other benefits of learning in the online environment (Kandri, 2020; Webster, 2020).

### **Study Limitations**

This research has several limitations. First, the use of non-probability sampling introduces the potential for bias and precludes the ability to generalize the findings beyond individual interviews. The authors of this paper have been teaching online for many years, which could have influenced data analysis and conclusions drawn. Furthermore, social desirability bias may have played a role because in some circumstances the interviewer was familiar with the participant. While a sample size of 26 is respectable for a small exploratory qualitative study, this sample lacks the diversity reflective of the broader social work professoriate.

### **Future Research**

Future research should evaluate the many ways that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted schools of social work with regard to shifting all operations online for an unlimited period. Faculty coping, work-life balance, work engagement, curriculum delivery, and transition to virtual learning should be examined, along with greater attention to the role faculty online prior to COVID-19 played in helping schools of social work rapidly pivot online and maintain remote faculty in a state of emergency and a new normal. As illuminated in this paper, COVID-19 introduced opportunities to build community and break down existing silos between campus-based and online-based faculty. Future research should explore how relationships among faculty shifted during this time and if a more cohesive faculty and profession emerges from this challenging time. The role of leadership before, during, and after COVID-19 could have interesting implications for the future of social work academia.

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