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Introduction

Computer-mediated communications (CMC) improves linkages between the social worker and their environment, e.g. independent therapists (Cafolla, 1999) or clinical work in death and dying (Sofka, 1997). CMC was predicted by the 1970s to offer benefits of synchronicity, interactiveness, demassification, and degrees of anonymity (see Bell, 1979; Hiltz & Turoff, 1978). In the 1980s and 1990s, those benefits drove an enormous increase in CMC use in the American society and, in turn, in the social work profession (Giffords, 1998). Application of CMC by social work organizations and practitioners for dissemination of information, stimulation of inquiries, and facilitation of collaborative communications is now common.

These potential benefits are accompanied by distinct problems. While software applications become more powerful, increased audience expectations demand better content creation and marketing. Second, some of these new technologies often failed to attract a "critical mass" of users despite significant capital investments – as illustrated by the dot.com collapse in the late 1990s. Accordingly, the potential benefits for use of the Internet must be balanced against both present and future costs and the degree of risk associated with the acceptance by customers/users.

In U.S. social work, academic programs and the practice community have seen benefits that outweigh costs and risks. Most social work education programs now offer Internet-based assistance for courses, many offer online courses, including online versions of practice courses and even Internet-based field instruction supervision are developing. Some programs are even staking claims on "virtual" service areas. Practitioners as well have chosen to move ahead with Internet-based applications.

Continuing social work education, however, has moved more slowly toward a "CE online" equivalent as compared to some of the efforts in regular instruction. Yet CE programs are receiving requests from deans, directors, and practitioners to do "CE online" and CE providers not aligned with social work academic programs are moving into traditional social work CE territory. This article suggests that social work CE programs must provide CE online, partner with an online CE provider, or allow others to do CE online and face a reduction in existing or potential market size.

This paper further suggests that CE programs can make better decisions facing these choices by reflecting on the history of continuing social work education. CE history contains several factors that help explain what appears to be a "conventional wisdom" for going slowly in this area while the actual situation faced by CE right now appears to be the reverse. Typical concerns and opportunities related to offering CE online are suggested. The two other alternatives for CE providers, aligning with another organization that provides CE online or not participating, are briefly considered. Conclusions, recommendations, and a summary of implications for needed research are offered.

Historical Development of CE

Social work continuing education did not evolve in a linear fashion during the twentieth century but instead can be seen as developing through a succession of periods that reflect responses to changes in the environment. Factors that influenced these periods included changes in availability of public funding, increased regulation, and managed care (see Strom & Green, 1995).

Creating historical periods injects some degree of interpretive bias. In this paper, the periods reflect the authors' experience over the past 30

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years in continuing education as well as the comments and discussions among CE professionals rather than use of an external analytical framework. Such a deliberately introspective, descriptive approach was chosen because how CE sees itself as able to continually adapt is an important element in the decision process regarding future challenges.

The authors identify five periods for U.S. con tinuing social work education. Figure I provides an illustration of these five periods.

Figure 1

Years	Major Characteristics
Up to 1976	Small programs in a few schools
1976-1985	Increased federal funds and target markets included non-social work professionals
1986-1992	More providers and more competition
1993-1997	Increased child welfare training and agency partnerships
1998-Current	Appearance of internet-based offerings

The first period lasted until 1976. Admittedly, there were many changes up to 1976. However, beginning in the mid-1970s, the sense of the authors and others is that changes became more frequent and more fundamental. For example, during the ten years of the second period (mid-1970s to the mid-1980s), substantial changes occurred as federal funds for training increased and the target market broadened to include non-BSW/MSWs. The third period, from the late 1980s to the early 1990s, includes significant changes resulting from increased economies of scale, increased diversity among providers, and increased competition. In a similar manner, the fourth period, the mid-1990s, encompasses expansion of public child welfare agency training and proliferation of partnerships between social work education entities and agencies.

In the fifth period, beginning in the late 1990s and continuing to the present, there is continued growth in "stand-up" training activities delivering

fee-based programs along with service contracts for in-service and organizational development. At the same time, this period witnessed what appears to be the first widespread introduction of Internet-based approaches in continuing education. The authors believe that this new delivery mechanism will be as fundamental a shift for social work continuing education as the major changes that marked the previous transitions and quite possibly a greater change than any other development in the past based on the historical discussion below.

Characteristics and Focus of Historical Periods of Social Work CE

Period 1 – Up to 1976

Prior to 1976, social work continuing education efforts in large part focused on the provision of postgraduate offerings for graduate program alumni (Strom & Green, 1995). This focus continued until the time of the recognition of the BSW as the entry-level educational degree for professional social work.

In this era, social work continuing education was usually presented as a fee-based workshop or an "institute" program. These activities were offered by graduate level social work programs and facilitated by their mainline, graduate faculty (Strom & Green, 1995). In addition, a limited number of programs throughout the U.S. offered multi-day institutes, often in the summer such as those at Boston College and Tulane University. Attendees were often alumni who returned year after year based on information shared with the authors from those responsible for these programs. Indeed an aspect of the program was an opportunity for alumni to maintain contacts with each other and the institution from which they earned their graduate degree.

Agencies and organizations often allowed staff more time for CE. More of a balance was sought between client service hours and non-direct contact functions such as professional development. As a result, social work staff had greater opportunity to

participate in continuing education events on agency time and with agency support.

The primary providers of continuing education were individual faculty members with an expertise in a particular area (see Strom & Green, 1995). The primary mode for delivery of continuing education was the familiar "stand-up" or podium-based instruction differing little from how those individual faculty members provided their own regular classroom teaching.

Period 2 – mid-1970s to mid-1980s

Social work continuing education programs expanded their focus during this second period to include a new market. In addition to the provision of postgraduate offerings for graduate program alumni from the first period, a second focus developed on in-service training to those providing social services but without BSW/MSW preparation (Strom & Green, 1995). This expansion was driven by the availability of federal Title XX short-term training funds. These funds provided an open-ended entitlement to enable state and county social service agencies to contract with continuing education programs to provide training for agency staff. While there were concerns raised by some (Gibelman & Humphries, 1982), others argued that the idea of providing training to this new group was an appropriate part of social work continuing education (see Green & Edwards, 1982).

As a result of this evolution, a "dual track" developed. Contract-based CE programs offering services to organizations became a parallel track to the traditional fee-based workshops and institutes. Contract programs provided training to public agency staff under service contracts to the organization rather than enrollment by individuals. The new customer was the agency.

In some locations, both tracks were provided by a single professional development unit such as at the University of Tennessee at Knoxville. In other settings, graduate programs themselves continued to provide fee-based programs for graduates such as Case Western Reserve University and

Boston College. In still others, units evolved that focused only on contract funded, in-service training such as the University of California at Davis Extension Division.

During this period, there was an increased use of non-faculty experts to provide both fee-based offerings and in-service training throughout the U.S. Some academic institutions developed university-based, non-faculty training staff to provide in-service training under contracts with agencies. The use of more non-faculty professional development staff gave CE program management more control over training development and delivery and assured greater sensitivity to the needs of the contracting agency.

A further evolution was the development of certificate programs. A small number of academic institutions began to assemble groups of non-credit courses typically centered on a practice specialty. For example, the growing interest in addictions education in turn led to the development of groups of courses focused on drug and alcohol addiction treatment. Completion of a particular group of courses was recognized as a non-credit, "certificate of completion."

Still, the vast majority of the programs offered both to individuals and under contract to organizations relied on a faculty member or trainer to personally provide instructional material. In the fee-based workshop/institute format, the material was idiosyncratic to the faculty person providing the program.But in a number of the in-service programs, a team of curriculum developers would create a training curriculum. In turn, standardized training materials would be written for use by anyone delivering that particular block of training. The expectation for in-service programs was that all participants would be receiving the same training regardless of the particular person hired to do the training.

Another evolution appeared during this era. Self-paced, self-instruction materials began to be developed and marketed. For the most part, materi-

als in this new approach were in written form. The first non-written approach was the use of interactive video training disc (IVD) technology. IVD allow curriculum designers to use non-linear instructional design. For example, a participant viewing an initial video clip could select a particular response. In turn, that particular response would result in viewing a second clip demonstrating the likely client reaction. This new technology had only limited use due to the very high cost of development and the high cost of playback equipment.

Period 3 – late 1980s to early 1990s

During the second period, social work continuing education grew in size and scope. In Period 3, continuing education began to change in character. This third period was marked by the maturation of very large professional development units such as those at SUNY Albany, the University of Tennessee at Knoxville, Temple University, University of California, Davis and the University of Texas at Austin. In addition, the diversity of organizations sponsoring such units increased, e.g. Albany, Tennessee and Texas were part of graduate social work programs, Temple migrated to the College of Business, and Davis was housed in the University Extension Division. And, perhaps the most critical change in the long-term, there was an increase in market place competition due to the increased number of providers of fee-based social work continuing education.

Additional providers were attracted to social work due to the increased demand for continuing education. Regulatory requirements on social work practice had increased resulting in an increase in the amount of continuing education required to practice. As the majority of states adopted legal regulation, most states required 10 – 20 hours a year of continuing education for those regulated to maintain their legal status. As a result, NASW (U.S. National Association of Social Workers) chapters began sponsoring continuing education, agencies opened up in-service offerings to outside participants for a fee, and there was a great expansion of

proprietary continuing education offerings. (At the same time, there was little growth in the number of certificate programs as the high cost to each participant tended to discourage expansion.)

Growth in large, contract funded in-service training programs continued. Units to provide these services expanded outside academic social work programs. Eventually, these units could be found at the college level such as at SUNY Albany. They also could be found at university extension units such as at the University of California, Davis. Some were affiliated with undergraduate programs such as Buffalo State University. Finally, even business schools such as Temple University became involved in in-service training programs.

Most often, professional development staff operated these new units. These were not social work academics but persons with proven skills in training needs assessment, training curriculum development and contract management. In many of these programs, specialists in curriculum development and direct training were secured under contract to augment those on staff. Over time, many units expanded beyond in-service training into areas such as organizational development and contracting to carry out specific research activities. This expansion was based on the view that significant changes in agency practice could not be achieved by training alone but required a much broader organizational development approach.

During this period, there were some limited attempts to develop technology-based continuing education. For the most part, these were supported by specific contracts. For example, the State of Washington's Department of Social Services contracted with Western Washington University to develop a statewide satellite live video in-service training program serving DSS staff throughout the state (Personal communications with Ellen Renner, Director of the Program, 1985). These contracts also supported the development of computer mediated instructional materials in the form of IVD training materials which were similar to the limited

initiatives a decade earlier. In a similar manner, county Title IV-A funds in Ohio for a short time supported exploration of replicating the Washington State satellite video training program as well as using compact disk interactive (CDI) technology to produce self-paced, nonlinear training materials for financial assistance staff. CDI used the same instructional design approach as use in IVDs but did not require as much hardware to use. Neither technology proved sustainable over the long run due to the exceptionally high costs of development.

These very limited activities in technology-based continuing education mirrored the very limited technology innovations in social work education in general. Leaders in social services computing such as Dick Schoech (1990) at the University of Texas, Arlington were not focused on the use of Internet-based education approaches for social work but on expanding the use of computer technologies in support of practice. The Encyclopedia of Social Work's section in 1995 on "Technological Innovations in Continuing Education" (Strom and Green, 1995) alluded to the possible use of interactive television but did not refer to Internet-based continuing education. Even a chapter on information technology in a monograph looking at future issues in social work practice that predicted the use of "individual interactive educational technologies for self-paced learning" (Gingerich and Green, 1996, p. 25) did not refer to the use of Internet-based technologies as the basis of this type of resource.

Period 4 – mid 1990s to late 1990s: In the middle 1990s, vigorous competition continued among a wide variety of providers. These providers offered fee-based workshops and institutes aimed at meeting mandatory continuing education licensing requirements. The vast majority of these offerings were of the traditional "stand-up" trainer mode. Even though continuing education was increasing and more variety of providers and training became available, certificate programs continued to remain a small portion of what was being offered.

There was significant change due to the expansion of both short-term (continuing education) and long-term degree programs serving public child welfare agencies fueled by the availability of federal training funds available through Title IV-E of the Social Security Act. The national effort on the part of the U.S. Children's Bureau, the Council on Social Work Education and the National Association of Social Workers to build partnership programs between social work educational units and state/local public agencies resulted in a range of new initiatives coming from accredited social work education programs (see Zlotnik, 1997). State departments of social services in many states ended up contracting with either individual social work education programs or consortia of programs such as in California and Missouri to prepare social work graduates for jobs in the public child welfare agency.

During this period there was limited evolution of technology supported training efforts. In the State of New York, the Department of Social Services supported the development of a fairly extensive video conferencing capacity to deliver workshop materials onsite around the state. The Department also supported, by a contract with Buffalo State University, the development of CD-ROM interactive training approaches which resulted in the development of at least one program. The CD-ROM approach used a similar instructional design as used with the IVD and CDIs which proved simply too expensive to develop on a regular basis.

Both satellite video, which allowed for one-way video, and two-way audio and video conferencing, which allowed for two-way video and audio, met the need of bringing training activities on site. The use of IVD, CDI or CD Rom met the same need but had the added advantage of the trainee controlling where and when they wanted to engage the material. Both these advantages were about to be confronted by a new delivery mecha-

nism, the Internet. The internet had the capacity to bring training and continuing education to the desk top at work or at home and depending on the instructional designed used can be either very interactive or quite lineal.

At this point in time internet-based technologies began to receive attention and there were begining discussions of the potential use of Internet-based technologies to support social work continuing education initiatives. Karger and Levine (1999) mention the possible use of the web for professional education but primarily focus on academic degree programs. David Paterson (2000) in Personal Computer Applications in the Social Services gives a slight reference to the development of presentation training materials that could be saved as web pages. In two articles, Mike Lauderdale and Mike Kelly, (1999), explore the use of asynchronous learning networks for continuing education and express their belief that those networks would be more effective and less expensive than the traditional stand-up approaches. However, despite the discussion in literature of "futuristic" opportunities, there is little evidence of concrete developments.

Period 5 - late 1990s to present

Much of current social work continuing education is a continuation of the activities at the end of the 1990s. "Stand-up" trainers deliver the majority of fee-based programs. In-service and organizational development efforts funded through service contracts are very strong across the nation. Continuing education (CE) demands have increased (Dietz, 1998) due to specialization (see for example Hagemaster, 2001), increased accountability (Dietz, 1998), and competition for funds.

Such a strong growth contrasts with the relatively slow growth of Internet-based social work continuing education. By the late 1990s, Internet-based academic education had begun to grow based on developments in hardware, software, Internet access, and consumer demand. Private for profit concerns had increasing visibility such as the

University of Phoenix with a heavy emphasis on the internet to deliver courses and degrees in many disciplines. Online courses begin to be offered in social work (Schoech, 2000, Stocks & Freddolino, 1998) as in many disciplines. Work was begun on a complete web based degree program was initiated by Florida State University. Internet-based support of traditional classroom courses began to be much more common on campuses throughout the country (Faux & Black-Hughes, 2000, Finn & Smith, 1997, Galambos & Neal, 1998).

In 2002, Sandell and Hayes (2002, p. 94) suggested the need for social work education programs to expand Internet-based continuing education. A review of social work organization web sites in August 2002 found only six NASW chapters that identified Internet-based continuing education courses for use by members in meeting licensing requirements. These chapters included California (seven), Georgia (four), Maryland (two), New Jersey (one), Utah (two), and Texas (four). In addition, the Association of Oncology Social Workers identified three offerings. In contrast, by that time many other disciplines made major use of Internet-based technology. A cursory view of internet-based continuing education courses in law, substance abuse treatment, and psychology at that time illustrates the relative difference. During just one month, the Tennessee Commission on Continuing Legal Education & Specialization provided 48 internet-based courses providing 45 continuing education hours available anywhere. The California Bar Association provided 96 courses covering over 50 hours using streaming video technology. The Distance Learning Center for Addiction Studies offered more than 35 courses, and the Association of Prescribing Psychologies offered over 300 hours of coursework.

At present (2003-2004), rapid changes in the use of technology are evident. In social work education, the use of technology has advanced to where a complete online MSW program was started by Florida State University in 2002 and a

"Technology-Enhanced Doctoral Program" was established at the University of Utah. Undergraduate social work courses online are commonplace – even the traditionally problematic practice courses. Field instruction has now evolved to accept field placements in other countries with supervision and field seminars conducted via the Internet. Internet-based courses and continuing education in numerous disciplines are becoming commonplace.

In contrast, Internet-based continuing education for social workers has just begun to develop. NASW's national web site at last lists distance CE as a separate area and offers several hundred courses. Many of the course providers offer Internet-based courses as well as older approaches such as videotapes, audiotapes, and printed materials. However, one of the interesting characteristics of this fifth period in CE development is that much of the development in social work CE online comes from providers outside of social work continuing education.

Historical Factors Contributing to Slow Adoption of CE Online

Clearly, social work continuing education up to now (until recently) has changed to meet the times. Looking at each of the five periods, one sees adaptation – often very prompt adaptation – in response to environmental changes. Why has social work continuing education responded more slowly to online opportunities when compared to other disciplines or to social work education? Three factors appear to contribute to a "conventional wisdom" argument for not pursuing CE online.

One factor is the historical use of "stand-up" presenters for both fee-based continuing education and contract funded in-service training. CE's pool of presenters includes many with important relationships to the organization such as tenured faculty members. In addition, in-person experienced presenters offer "low maintenance" vehicles for delivery of content and for representing the organi-

zation and responding to inquiries by participants. Thus, one argument is that CE programs have a large investment and successful track record with existing podium presenters and need to stay with them.

Another historical factors is the belief in a "high touch, low tech" nature of social work practice resulting from recruitment of persons into social work that dislike technology and prefer face-to-face communications. This is akin to the argument made for years that social support could not be effectively conveyed in a CMC environment and that face-to-face would always be the preferred medium in any situation for social work (see Schopler, Abell, & Galinksky, 1998).

Another historical factor suggested has been the limited amount of information technology competence required for entry into social work education programs and the very limited training for undergraduate and graduate students in those programs. Even programs using distance education technologies gave little emphasis to the pre-existing skills or development of skills in information technology. Very few programs even in the 1990s attempted to develop information technology skills in students despite the clear indications of growth in areas such as electronic support groups. The conventional wisdom also argued that senior social work educators came into the field of higher education prior to the advent of personal computers and their instructional experience is for the most part related to the traditional lecture/seminar formats. As a result, it was argued that CE was putting the cart before the horse to move into CE online.

The Current Situation

The actual situation faced by continuing social work education in the U.S. is far different than the conventional wisdom discussed suggests. Social work education has rapidly changed direction regarding use of Internet-based instruction. Online courses are common and even practice courses and field seminar and supervision is becoming accepted in Internet-based formats. At least one B.S.W. pro-

gram now requires every graduate to have taken at least one foundation course online. An online M.S.W. is available and most of a Ph.D.

Senior social work academicians now operate in a radically different environment. University administrations talk about a large amount and possibly a majority of traditional education becoming Internet-based. Many campuses now strongly influence faculty to offer Internet-based support to all their in-person courses.

Social work is adjusting to the realization that incoming students may prefer to work directly with people but they are comfortable as a group with information technology; "high touch, high tech" will be realized once social work as a profession ceases to define itself as technologically inept.

In addition to the diminution of those historical factors, there are three emerging reasons why Internet-based social work continuing education should be considered by all CE programs.

First, the refusal to offer Internet-based CE is at odds with the needs of persons in numerous practice arenas that do not provide sufficient economies of scale to support the use of group based "stand-up" training events. Whether it is due to geographic dispersion, or the nature of specialty practice, or the uniqueness of clients' needs, there are many examples of social workers who need continuing education provided either individually or in very small groups. Practice areas such as HIV services, domestic violence shelters or services to the homeless are found in most communities but usually have relatively small staffs that lack the critical mass to support the traditional approaches to continuing education. While there are a growing number of commercial providers, these providers do not have the extensive history of social work CE nor do they have the same degree of grounding in needed topics.

Second, the rush of commercial providers into Internet-based continuing education threatens to undercut the revenues generated by existing stand-up and other forms of CE. While social work con-

tinuing education tends to look at Internet-based CE as a separate and distinct area, providers of Internet-based CE look at the entire market as potential expansion area. In addition, social work programs face a substantial risk of losing the opportunity to mount an Internet-based program as the new competitors proliferate. Practitioners will respond to the attractive web sites and direct mail solicitations by national training companies as well as to the very inexpensive CE offered by small but aggressive firms.

Other practitioners will patronize organizations with established reputations that are now implementing Internet-based CE. And, some practitioners will certainly be responsive to the slower-growing but possibly more potent threat posed by large social work programs marketing their CE online services throughout a state, region, or even nationally – especially when the practitioner is an alumnus!

Third, internet-based continuing education may be effective and more efficient than "stand-up" delivery or other approaches such as institutes, workshops, etc. Present and emerging information technology now offers substantiated potential for non-face-to-face education and training (see for example Bookhagen, Wegenast, & McCowan, 2002; Cauble & Thurston, 2000; Schoech, 2000; Stallings, 2001; Stocks & Fredolino, 2000); at present, many programs are developing technology-based MSWs. In response, more online vendors offer CE even while the dot-com "bubble" collapse reduced the number of academic providers. As a result, social work programs' CE efforts face an opportunity for growth as well as a substantially more competitive marketplace.

In light of those three reasons, it might be expected that social work continuing education is rapidly responding as it has during previous periods in its history. However, the apparent need to move ahead is in contradiction to what is actually happening in the U.S. For example, the social work CE literature contains little on this issue of growing

importance; review of five years of Social Work Abstracts discloses almost no publications. Kelly and Lauderdale (1999) first explore the issue in their examination of asynchronous learning networks for CE and conclude such networks may be more effective and less expensive than the traditional approaches. Sandell and Hayes (2002, p. 94) suggest social work programs should begin to offer Internet-based CE. But a review of Social Work Abstracts indicates that no literature has been forthcoming beyond these typical "emerging issue" pieces.

Given the lack of current CE online practice literature it is important to clearly understand those concerns that block progress in this area and have kept social work CE programs from moving strongly in the development of online options. It is also important to weight the opportunities that are awaiting those programs that are willing to risk venturing into this new "territory."

Major Concerns

CE online requires learning a new operating environment. Stepping into the virtual education business is entering a new world. It requires substantial grounding in computers, software and operating system alternatives, familiarity with video and audio recording and distribution technologies and the evolving communication technologies of the internet. As a result, a significant problem is the disorientation and lack of familiar metrics that occur with entry into a new situation where senses must deal with new inputs. CE professionals can walk into most workshops and in a few minutes form an opinion of the presenter and the attractiveness of the workshop. Developing the ability to operate in the online environment as easily as the in-person environment should be a major concern.

A second major concern is institution sanction and resource. Budget cutbacks and other changes in education and human services have reduced institutional enthusiasm for new ventures. Institutions are wary of liability, unfunded obligations, stretched information technology (IT) resources, and a host of other problems. A thorough understanding of the issues in content, control, and capability is important in addressing institutional concerns.

The third major concern is more threatening. The online environment is attractive for use in education just as in entertainment and information services. Many educators have been arguing for years that online is limited or inadequate or a passing fad. However, use of Internet-assisted teaching appears to be a general pattern throughout higher education and appears to confirm that CE online appears to be a practical tool for reaching new audiences and for better reaching existing audiences. As a result, new competitors are entering traditional continuing social work education markets. Ironically, the ultimate threat to continuing social work education providing CE online may be the popularity and widespread use of CE online.

Opportunities

There are many opportunities for social work continuing education in CE online including: potential improvements in image, income, involvement by practitioners, improvements in curriculum (see for example McFall & Freddolino, 2000), improving IT capability of CE programs, and providing spin-off benefits. For example, Internet-based CE improves program image by demonstrating a proactive stance regarding practitioner needs, offers a motivation for more web site traffic, and emphasizes the program's strengths.

Income benefits may come from both niche markets as well as mass markets. CE online allows the CE online provider to reach out geographically and address small groups with specialized training needs at their convenience. Buy-in of niche markets is important because these small markets often are subject to less competition, often are more loyal, and allow developing specialized expertise. In addition, niche markets are the ones that many social work continuing education programs know very well and have a competitive advantage vis a vis national efforts by non-social work providers. In

mass markets, some continuing education programs can use the leverage of well-known names and existing CE programs to develop mass market CE online offerings. In this case, the revenue flows from expanded programs will rapidly offset the limited costs to get into CE online.

Involvement by practitioners increases as Internet-based CE, as opposed to conventional CE, overcomes increasing barriers of travel costs and scheduling problems and leads to stronger and richer ties to the practice community, additional resources for teaching and guest lectures, and possibly increased applications for admissions. Internet-based CE also can lead to curriculum improvements as specialty topics are identified, presented, and move into the curriculum. Doing CE online will upgrade the web capability of the existing CE organization. Marketing via email, attractiveness of web sites, using short Internet-based infomercials to promote attendance at in-person training is one secondary benefit resulting from the resources expended to go into CE online.

Spin-off benefits of CE online may also provide such things as online testing which in turn may be used at some in-person sites in place of paper and pencil tests. Given that computer access is more common in training areas, CE online may also provide reference materials online that can be used in the course of training accessed by individuals or accessed at the podium by the instructor and shown on a screen. CE online also offers the possibility of hybrid in-person / Internet-based training. Existing CE online modules can be integrated into an in-person course where the instructor's reputation draws students and the use of online modules allows more students to be accommodated.

Other Options

The two other alternatives for CE providers, aligning with another organization that provides CE online or not participating, do offer advantages for some programs. Smaller CE providers might consider allowing a "pass-through" approach so that

large CE online programs would be marketed and administered to some degree by the smaller program; the smaller program would continue their offerings of non-Internet programs. Or, smaller CE programs might seek a union with a larger provider in order to avoid losses by both large and small programs to non-social work providers. Finally, some CE programs may well move toward focusing on a niche market of in-person programs popular enough to keep a clientele despite Internet offerings. While none of these alternatives appear to be in use today, they may well pose attractive alliances for many CE programs.

Conclusion and Recommendations

Continuing social work education programs have shown an historical ability to adapt to a wide variety of changes. However, the advent of CE online appears to presage both a major change in how programs do business as well as potentially curtailing their markets. There are many content, control, and capability issues involved with implementing CE online but most of those issues are familiar to CE programs. The critical challenges for programs are to gain a degree of comfort in thinking about and operating in an internet environment, address their institution's or organization's sanction and resource issues, and move aggressively to avoid having their markets curtailed by the overall growth in the U.S. in online (Internet) education. If CE programs will pursue CE online, there are many benefits in addition to maintaining or expanding their existing clients.

Based on the discussion above, three recommendations appear to be in order. First, continuing education social work providers should act quickly to understand and develop plans regarding their response to the increase in Internet-based education. Second, staying aware of market-place changes in CE online should become a regular part of their operations both to understand competitive threats as well as to assimilate new ideas and changes. Third, CE providers should consider, as an

absolute minimum, implementing a pilot online course to develop their own familiarity with this new environment. Now is the time for continuing social work education to use CE online or perhaps lose the opportunity.

A final area concerns developments in countries other than the U.S. This article presumes that developments facing continuing social work education providers in the U.S. will be duplicated at some time in some other countries. How does the development of CE online differ between countries? Are there lessons learned elsewhere that may be applicable in the U.S?

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