



COUNCIL ON SOCIAL WORK EDUCATION

IN PARTNERSHIP WITH



SACRAMENTO STATE

Social Work Student Perceptions

IMPACT OF COVID-19 PANDEMIC ON EDUCATIONAL EXPERIENCE AND GOALS

In May 2020 the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) partnered with faculty from California State University, Sacramento, Division of Social Work to deploy a survey on the impact of the abrupt change from in-person social work education courses to online courses as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. The Sacramento State research team's survey focused on currently enrolled social work students' experiences during the abrupt nationwide pivot to online education due to the pandemic in the spring 2020 semester, students' intentions to enroll in fall 2020 courses under different scenarios, and how students had been personally affected by the pandemic. The Sacramento State team launched the survey on April 28, 2020 to students enrolled in California-based social work programs. Current social work students were invited to participate through e-mail messages forwarded by their program. The survey did not evaluate the experience or intentions to enroll of incoming students.

To bolster the responses from currently enrolled students, CSWE partnered with the project on May 7, 2020 and invited representatives of CSWE's 532 accredited baccalaureate social work programs and 282 accredited master's social work programs, plus representatives from 17 practice doctorate programs and 79 research doctorate programs, representing 546 unique institutions, to share the invitation to complete the survey via e-mail with their currently enrolled students. CSWE also shared the invitation message on its Facebook page. Sacramento State Institutional review board (IRB) determined this research exempt. Data collection closed on May 22, 2020.

A total of 3,564 surveys were completed by students, representing 151 institutions in 44 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. Response numbers per institution ranged from 1 to 322, and per state ranged from 1 to 1,146. The number of respondents from California was disproportionately high (32.2%) when compared to enrollment data collected for the [2018 Statistics on Social Work Education in the United States](#) (CSWE, 2019) (7.8%), probably due to the Sacramento State team's involvement in the project and the earlier administration of the survey to California-based students.

TABLE 1. Comparison of Survey Respondents by Program Level to National Enrollment Data by Program Level From the 2018 Statistics on Social Work Education in the United States.

	Survey Respondents ^a (%)	National Data ^b (%)
Baccalaureate Level	39.6	45.5
Master's Level	58.8	51.9
Doctoral Level (Research & Practice combined)	1.6	2.6

^aN=3,564

^bN=129,222 reported enrolled students

17.3% of survey respondents were enrolled in fully online programs pre-pandemic. For master's student respondents, 20.4% were in online programs, versus 12.4% of baccalaureate students and 16.4% of doctoral students. These respondents were not included in the data presented for questions on the shift to online education and returning to campus.

Highlights From the Data

If classes were offered in person in fall 2020, **91.1%** of students who would typically enroll in person would enroll, while **5.8%** would not enroll, and **3.1%** preferred not to state.

If classes were offered only online in fall 2020 due to the pandemic, **82.4%** of students who would typically enroll in person would enroll, while **10.7%** would not enroll, and **6.9%** preferred not to state.

Of respondents who are required to complete a field placement experience in fall 2020, **68.0%** would prefer to do so in person, whereas **21.5%** would prefer that it not be in person. Another **8.4%** would prefer to postpone until spring 2021 and await more information.

A total of **62.5%** of respondents said they were generally satisfied with the clarity of information received from their professors about online class changes and expectations due to the pandemic.

A total of **56.1%** of respondents said they were generally satisfied with the clarity of information received from their universities.

A total of **95.6%** of respondents did not believe the pandemic could cause them to change to a different major.

Shift to Online Education

TABLE 2. During the response to the COVID-19 pandemic, how satisfied are you with the clarity of information you received from your university?

Level of Satisfaction	Percentage
Generally satisfied	56.1
Generally dissatisfied	8.7
Varied levels of satisfaction	34.7
Not applicable	0.3
Prefer not to state	0.2

Note: N=3,554

A small percentage of students nationwide indicated that they were dissatisfied with the clarity of information their university provided during the pandemic. Among doctoral students, 70.2% reported that they were generally satisfied.

TABLE 3. How satisfied are you with the clarity of information you received from your professors about online class changes and expectations?

Level of Satisfaction	Percentage
Generally satisfied	62.5
Generally dissatisfied	7.4
Varied levels of satisfaction	28.1
Not applicable	1.8
Prefer not to state	0.2

Note: N=3,553

Students nationwide indicated that they were satisfied with the information received from their professors, with 62.5% being satisfied. For all respondents, only 7.4% were dissatisfied with the information their professors provided.

Online Learning

TABLE 4. As a result of all classes being switched to online delivery, would you say...

Level of Learning	Percentage
I learned less	61.1
I learned about the same	31.2
I learned more	3.2
Not applicable	3.6
Prefer not to state	1.0

Note: N=2,689

TABLE 5. Overall, did you prefer online delivery of all classes to in-person classes?

Preference	Percentage
No	80.8
Yes	14.7
Not applicable	2.9
Prefer not to state	1.6

Note: N=2,665

The majority of social work students reported that their experience of learning declined after moving to an online platform (61.1%). Of the 1,633 respondents who said they learned less, 64.8% estimated they learned at least 40% less. Across all degree levels, at least four of five students did not prefer the online delivery of all their classes after attending classes in person.

Supports During COVID-19

Respondents were asked in an open-ended question about the things their instructors or universities did well during the pandemic to promote learning and/or enhance online course delivery. Students' responses varied widely; the most prevalent themes were method of course delivery online, aspects of clear and open communication, and instructor's empathy.

Respondents preferred classes that were administered in a synchronous model at the originally scheduled class time, via Zoom, Microsoft Teams,

or Webex, with options that allowed for group discussions and interactions with classmates. Students also appreciated flexible due dates and having the option to check-in with the professor during each course, which they thought allowed them to better cope with the stressors and challenges that they were facing.

Following are some examples of this from responses:

They (instructors) made themselves available to us, made plenty of announcements and sent emails with the changing expectations, were very gracious as we all adjusted to the difficulty of doing presentations etc. online, and had us all attend class with our cameras on so we could see each other (this created a greater sense of being together despite being torn apart).

My Social Work professors were super empathetic and understanding. Many of us are in the field and COVID has brought us increased stress and work. Professors in other departments ranged from unsympathetic to unrealistic.

Enrolling for Classes in Fall 2020

TABLE 6. If your university decides to offer all classes in fall 2020 online, will you...

Anticipated Action	Percentage
Not enroll	10.7
Enroll	82.4
Prefer not to state	6.9

Note: N=1,657

Of total respondents, 32.8% reported that they were graduating in spring 2020. Of the remaining 1,657 respondents that began their semesters in face-to-face settings, 10.7% said that they would not enroll in classes in fall 2020 if their universities continued to offer classes online only, whereas

6.9% chose not to state. Fewer students at California-based programs indicated that they would not enroll for online only courses (7.8%) than did students in the rest of the country (10.7%). Their response may have been influenced by the California State University Chancellor’s May 12, 2020, announcement that the system plans to primarily offer courses online in fall 2020 (California State University, 2020). The percentage of master’s level respondents who stated they would not enroll was less (8.8%) than the percentage of baccalaureate level respondents (13.7%). Of the 29 doctoral level students who responded to this question, 100% intended to enroll for fall 2020. Of the 1,365 respondents who intended to enroll for courses online, 74.4% indicated they would enroll full-time. A higher percentage of baccalaureate students (89.0%) intended to enroll full-time, whereas only 64.0% of master’s students and 65.5% of doctoral students intended to enroll full-time.

TABLE 7. If your university decides to offer all classes in fall 2020 in-person, will you...

Anticipated Action	Percentage
Not enroll	5.8
Enroll	91.1
Prefer not to state	3.1

Note: N=1,639

If classes are in person in fall 2020, 91.1% of students would choose to enroll, with negligible differences by degree level. Of the 1,493 respondents who reported they would enroll for in-person classes, 76.1% would do so full-time. A higher percentage of baccalaureate students (90.7%) intended to enroll full-time, whereas only 64.9% of master’s students and 67.7% of doctoral students intended to enroll full-time.

Fall 2020 Field Placements

Of nongraduating respondents, 71.6% said they would be required to participate in a field practice experience in fall 2020 as part of their degree program. Master’s level students were most likely to need to complete a field placement in the fall 2020 semester (83.4%), followed by 59.4% of baccalaureate students and 5.8% of doctoral students.

TABLE 8. If you are required to participate in a field practice experience in the fall, and it is offered, would you prefer to...

Type of Participation Preferred	Percentage
In person	68.0
Non in person	21.5
Postpone	8.4
Prefer not to state	2.1

Note: N=1,784

Of respondents required to participate in a field practice experience in fall 2020, more than two thirds would prefer to complete it in person if it is offered (68.0%), whereas 21.5% would prefer to participate virtually or in a format that was not in person, and 8.4% would want it postponed. A higher percentage of baccalaureate students prefer an in-person placement (71.1%) than master’s students (66.2%), with 24.7% of master’s students preferring not to participate in person versus 16.3% of baccalaureate students. Only 6.9% of master’s students preferred postponing their field placement compared to 10.5% of baccalaureate students.

Personal Impact on Students

Time to degree. Many respondents were unsure whether the pandemic would delay their time to degree (41.8% of respondents), whereas 40.3% did not believe it would delay their time to degree and 17.8% believed it would delay their time to degree.

Changing majors. A total of 95.6% of respondents did not believe the pandemic could cause them to change to a different major.

Disruption to financial security. A majority of respondents (64.6%) indicated they had experienced “some” (37.1%) or “very much” (27.5%) disruption to their financial security since social distancing orders were put in place.

Mental health. A majority of respondents (80.7%) indicated that their mental health had been adversely affected during the pandemic, with 47.5% saying it had been affected “some” and 33.2% saying it had been “very much” affected.

Demographics of Respondents

The average age of all respondents was 30.2 years (27.4 years for baccalaureate, 32.0 years for master's, 37.9 years for doctoral), whereas the average ages of respondents who were not previously enrolled in an online-only program was 29.6 years.

Respondents who identified as female were 87.3% of respondents, whereas 10.4% were males, and 1.7% were nonbinary respondents. The most recently published report with enrollment data on students' sex, 2017 Statistics on Social Work Education in the United States (CSWE, 2018), had females comprising 85.2% of the national body, males representing 13.7%, and "other" students representing less than 0.1%.

Some noticeable differences were seen between the race/ethnicities of all respondents and the national picture from 2017, notably African American students comprising 11.3% of respondents compared to 21.7% of enrolled

students nationally, and Latinx students comprising 20.9% of respondents compared to 14.2% of enrolled students nationally.

TABLE 9. Do you identify as...

Racial/Ethnic Identification	All respondents (%)	2017 National data (%)
African American	11.3	21.7
American Indian	0.7	0.9
Asian	4.0	2.9
Latinx	20.9	14.2
Pacific Islander	0.7	0.3
Multi-racial	5.2	2.6
White	53.6	48.3
Other	1.9	0.9
Prefer not to state/Unknown	1.6	8.3

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