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“I got to sit at the table”: The Impact of Distance Social Work Education in Rural and Tribal Communities in Montana

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Abstract

Online education has been proposed as a potential tool for addressing social work workforce gaps by meeting student needs in rural and remote settings. However, little research explores the use of distance learning in BSW education for rural states and with large Native American populations. To help fill this gap, we investigated a BSW distance learning program that serves rural and Native American students in the Western United States. Using semi-structured interviews, we elicited the views of students, staff, and faculty surrounding the program’s unique strengths and areas for improvement. In this program, students complete two years of in-person classes at a Tribal or community college in their area, followed by two years of online classes through an accredited school of social work at a mid-sized state university. The interviews were coded and analyzed using a qualitative descriptive approach. The results of the study highlight the importance of meeting students’ needs, building strong relationships with rural and Tribal partners, and tailoring curriculum to address the needs of communities served. Participant quotes speak to the ability of distance learning to provide a flexible and supportive educational opportunity for rural and Native American students. We believe that online education, when done with care and culturally adapted for communities, can be an important tool in developing the social work workforce for rural and Tribal communities. We discuss implications for future social work distance learning programs.

Introduction

Beginning in 2010, the University of Montana began building partnerships with Tribal and community colleges, to create a BSW distance education program. The University of Montana currently has matriculation agreements with five Tribal colleges and an additional five community colleges in the state. These partnerships were built upon existing relationships with individuals from Tribal communities and community colleges throughout the state. Through a shared recognition that distance was a major barrier for pursuing higher education in remote Montana, this group of individuals co-created the 2+2 distance learning program. This program is designed to engage students and provide them with an opportunity to stay in their communities. Students complete two years of schoolwork at a Tribal or community college near them, followed by two years of online classes provided by a public state university. For a more detailed description of the development of this program please see (Liddell et al., Accepted; Liddell et al., Under Review).

Online social work courses and degree programs have been applauded as having the potential to help democratize the social work field by providing opportunities for working students, students who are parents, and low-income students to pursue higher education (Kurzman, 2019). Since the early 2000's, online doctoral, MSW, and BSW social work programs have increased at a high rate (Vernon et al., 2009; Council on Social Work Education, 2022). The Covid-19 pandemic has only accelerated the need for and development of these programs. According to the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), one in five accredited BSW programs offer an online learning option. This represents a marked increase in the availability of online programs since 2020, which was estimated to be about 10% (Council on Social Work Education, 2022).

As online education has become more widely utilized, critics have pointed out important areas for improvement. For example, reviews of online learning have emphasized the need for consistent and clear communication from faculty, written guidelines and protocols specific to online curriculum, interactive coursework, and technological support for students and faculty alike (Afrouz & Crisp, 2021; Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). These improvements are especially valuable for combatting high attrition rates of online programs, which have left some students with increased debt and without qualifications needed to secure employment (Seery et al., 2021). Online courses and degrees run by third-party companies, have faced scrutiny for profiting from unethical recruitment strategies, resulting in government guidelines for such partnerships (United States Government Accountability Office, 2022). Establishing connections between faculty and students in an online environment is another challenge of e-learning, however, methods for improving and reconceptualizing academic relationships in this setting are being increasingly researched (Kurzman, 2019; Smith et al., 2018; Vlachopoulos & Makri, 2019). Additional challenges described by online BSW programs include providing supportive field education opportunities and ensuring adequate technology skills and access (Kurzman, 2019; Longoria & de Lourdes Martinez-Aviles, 2014). Critics of distance learning for social work programs have expressed apprehension about the ability to teach clinical skills without face-to-face interaction, however, technology advancements like computer simulation and virtual reality have provided innovative solutions (Baker & Jenney, 2022; Huttar & BrintzenhofeSzoc, 2020).

Despite these criticisms, strong evidence exists indicating that online courses and programs can be an effective method of learning for students (Afrouz & Crisp, 2021). The flexibility of an asynchronous curriculum has expanded access to education for students who are parents and

students who must work while in school (Engle & Tinto, 2008; Kurzman, 2019; Tallent-Runnels et al., 2006). Additionally, online education may fulfill a particularly important social justice need, as it allows for social work students to stay in their communities and provide needed social services, instead of requiring them to commute long distances or move to cities where the cost of living is extremely high (Ives & Aitken, 2008; Kurzman, 2019; Smith et al., 2018). For Native American students living remotely or in Tribal communities, distance learning may facilitate their ability to practice cultural traditions and build cultural efficacy, which may be related to a closer proximity to family and Tribal community (Gonzalez et al., 2022; Ives & Aitken, 2008).

In 2010, the Task Force on Native Americans in Social Work Education recommended distance education as a potential avenue for increasing the Native American social work workforce (Council on Social Work Education, 2010). At this time, less than 500 full-time social workers identified as Native American in the United States (Council on Social Work Education, 2010). An interdisciplinary program at The University of Hawai'i at Mānoa has established a hybrid-online interdisciplinary program with an explicit focus on increasing the Native Hawaiian healthcare workforce (DeMattos, 2019). The University of North Dakota has developed meaningful partnerships with the Standing Rock Sioux Tribe at Sitting Bull College (SBC) and the Turtle Mountain Band of Chip-pewa at Turtle Mountain Community College to establish pathways for Native American students to complete a BSW and remain in their communities (Heitkamp et al., 2015). These are valuable examples of partnerships between large universities and Native American entities to bolster Native American student enrollment in helping professions. Despite their potential, these innovative programs are scarce and scholarship regarding the benefits of distance learning for remote and underserved areas is extremely limited.

The demand for distance learning programs is especially high in rural states like Montana, which is one of the least populated, and least urban states in the nation, with an average of seven people per square mile (United States Census Bureau, 2022). The need for social workers to address mental health in Montana is driven by high rates of substance use and suicide (Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, 2022; Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2019). An estimated 10.1% of the population in Montana experience a substance use disorder, of which only about 5% are documented as engaging in a treatment program (Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2020). Montana has the fifth highest rate of suicide in the nation, with the highest rates of suicide experienced by Native Americans in Montana (Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, 2022). Montana is also rated second highest for proportion of children in temporary care and has continued to experience rates of investigations by child and family services (CFS) that are higher than the national average (Montana Department of Public Health and Human Services, 2021). Native American children in Montana are also vastly over-represented in the child welfare system; 36.4% of children in foster care in Montana are Native American despite comprising only 9.3% of the total state population of children (Children's Bureau, 2021). These issues are exacerbated by a lack of providers throughout the state, with all counties being designated as mental healthcare shortage areas, and by a long history of colonialism that has contributed to the surveillance of Native American families (Health Resources & Services Administration, 2023; O'Sullivan, 2016).

Educational Context

As a result of colonialism, education has been weaponized to undermine the culture and knowledge of Native American tribes (Jacobs, 2009). Residential boarding schools, established throughout the United States and Canada, have severely disrupted the passing down of intergenerational knowledge amongst tribes and families, resulting in long-lasting trauma (Jacobs, 2009). The U.S. Department of Interior estimates that there have been 18 residential boarding schools across Montana (Maureen & Mike Mansfield Library, 2021). Several of these locations are still in operation today as public, private, or Tribal schools and at least one site is used as student housing at a Tribal college (Maureen & Mike Mansfield Library, 2021). These sites are physical reminders of colonialist violence. Additionally, aspects of colonialism continue to live on in Western educational pedagogy. Scholars of social work education, Autumn Asher BlackDeer and Maria Gandarilla Ocampo, state that white saviorism and white supremacy continue to be upheld in social work education curriculum and structure (2022). For example, field placements that put white social work students in communities of color frequently exploit these communities for the benefit of white social worker's education, framing historical trauma as an "educational opportunity" (Blackdeer & Ocampo, 2022). Some aspects of white supremacy culture include a sense of urgency, perfectionism, objectivity, "worshipping the written word," objectivity, and binary thinking (Okun, 1999). White supremacy culture enacted in social work education can result in strict and inflexible deadlines and an over-emphasis on writing skills without providing support. Many social work programs in partnership with Indigenous communities are beginning challenge white supremacist attitudes and practices and reclaim and redesign program curriculum and pedagogy.

The University of Montana BSW distance program has partnered with communities to begin to do this work. There exist 12 Tribal Nations in Montana (Blackfeet, Chippewa-Cree, Confederated Salish & Kootenai, Crow, Assiniboine or Nakoda, Grow Ventre, Sioux, and Northern Cheyenne, and Little Shell Chippewa) and seven thriving Tribal Colleges (Montana Office of Public Instruction, 2015; Montana University System, 2023). These colleges provide revenue for Tribal Nations, result in increased wages for graduates, and are important locations for building and maintaining culture. For example, between 2013-2014, Salish Kootenai College (SKC) taught over 1,761 students, contributed \$49.5 million to the Flathead Reservation, and resulted in an estimated \$43.4 million in higher wages for students throughout their careers (Stockwell, 2016). The vast majority of students (74-96.9%) of Tribal Colleges are Native American (Stockwell, 2016). In addition to benefiting economically from Tribal colleges, Native American Montanans have reclaimed education through these institutions by establishing governance. For example, SKC's Board of Directors, is comprised of Tribal members and voted on by Confederated Salish and Kootenai Tribal Council (Salish Kootenai College, 2023). Other Tribal Colleges have similar governing structures.

The Montana state constitution includes a provision called "Indian Education for All." (Montana Office of Public Instruction, n.d). This provision mandates that "every Montanan, whether Indian or non-Indian, be encouraged to learn about the distinct and unique heritage of American Indians in a culturally responsive manner" (Montana Office of Public Instruction, n.d., Section 20-1-501, 2a). Additionally, this provision states that for all educational entities, faculty, and staff must coordinate with local Tribes to create culturally congruent curriculum and programs (Montana Office of Public Instruction, n.d.). This educational context sets the stage for the distance learning program discussed in this article.

To our knowledge, no other scholarship explores the role of distance education to address workforce shortages and improve educational opportunities in Montana. Moreover, only a few studies explore the benefits of distance learning for rural communities and/or for Native American students (Petracchi, 2000). Considering the long legacy of colonialism in the United States educational system, the limited scholarship exploring partnerships with Tribal colleges represents a major gap in social work pedagogical research. This article is unique for its focus on an existent distance learning program for rural and Native American students.

Purpose

This article is part of a larger study investigating the experiences and perspectives of faculty, administration, and students regarding a BSW distance learning program. Though several research papers have arisen from this study, this paper is focused specifically on rural and Native American student experiences. The research questions prompting this inquiry are “what are the unique needs and experiences of rural and Native American BSW distance students?” and “in what ways does the BSW distance learning program meet or fall short of meeting these needs?” The results of this paper aim to address these questions by highlighting relevant themes that have emerged from participant interviews.

The BSW distance learning program arose to fill a need for social work education in remote Montana and within Tribal communities. As the demand for social workers continues to increase, particularly in areas which are underserved, exploration of ways to ensure that these programs are of high quality and advantageous for rural and Native American social work students is imperative. This study provides an example of a unique distance learning social work program designed to reach underserved populations and contributes valuable knowledge to social work education research.

Research Design

Qualitative description methodology was used to complete this study. We chose this methodology because of its pragmatic approach and emphasis on limiting interpretation of data (Sandelowski, 2000). To adhere to the meaning and intent of participants words, we sought to present participants’ quotes in context and provide analysis with low abstraction (Sandelowski, 2000). This method results in analysis that is descriptive; it is not meant to be used to create theory or reconceptualize data (Sullivan-Boylai et al., 2005). Consistent with this methodology, the results of this study were written for the purposes of being directly translated into interventions and improvements, and to be easily read by participants (Sandelowski, 2000; Sullivan-Boylai et al., 2005).

The contributing authors and research assistants who have worked on this study do not identify as Native American. As a result, they have engaged in ongoing reflection surrounding their positionality as white researchers. This iterative process has involved seeking culturally congruent methods of research, recognizing and resisting power imbalances, and holding each other accountable. We recognize that reflecting on our positionality necessitates close examination of structural, economic, social, and political forces involved in this project and seek to go beyond stating our individual narratives and good intent to consider the impact of our actions in research (Strega & Brown, 2015). The creation of authentic partnerships with Tribal members has been

essential to the development of this program and has arisen because of the long-term relationship building.

Setting and Participants

This study is unique insofar as it elicits the perspectives of faculty and staff as well as students. Currently, there are relatively few studies that explore an individual program from a wide range of viewpoints (Lee et al., 2019). Four faculty members from Tribal and community colleges, three field support staff, and eight students participated in the study. All students were contacted via email and asked to participate. In total, 20 students self-selected to complete the survey, and eight students completed the interviews. Participating faculty members ($n=4$) and field support staff ($n=3$) were recruited using convenience sampling. Due to small sample sizes, the demographic information of participants in this study is not available. However, the general demographics of students enrolled in the program overall are included. Approximately 160 students have been enrolled in the program since 2024. Of these students, 84% ($n=136$) identified as female, 58% ($n=93$) identified as first-generation students, and 14% ($n=23$) stated they had a disability. Though the majority of students identified as white (58%; $n=93$), a large proportion identified as American Indian/Native American (34%, $n=54$). Two participants identified as Asian, one participant identified as Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander, and 11 participants did not provide their racial identity (1%). Interviews took place on Zoom and were conducted by the second author from March-May 2022. All participants provided consent to be interviewed and for the interviews to be recorded prior to participating. The University of Montana Institutional Review Board reviewed this study and deemed it exempt.

Data Collection & Analysis

Various recruitment methods were utilized to reach study participants. Emails were sent to all current students of the BSW distance learning program, requesting their involvement in the study. Convenience sampling was used for recruitment of faculty and staff. This method was chosen in order to continue to build upon existing relationships. Potential participants were encouraged to contact a study author with questions regarding the study or to schedule an interview. There is a potential that not all individuals involved in the program were invited to partake in this study, which is a limitation of this study.

Rubin and Rubin's method of responsive interviewing was used as a guide for the interview process (CITE). This method places importance on follow-up questions and flexibility on behalf of the interviewer. The interviews for this project lasted 15 to 44 minutes, averaging about a half an hour in length. The recorded interviews were transcribed professionally and then checked for accuracy by researchers working on this project. To thank participants for their time, a small gift equal to \$25 was sent to each person.

The transcripts were coded using NVivo by two different coders. The Cohen's kappa coefficient was between .82 and .99, which indicates high inter-rater agreement (Burla et al., 2008). Prior to coding, we read over the full-transcripts multiple times and established a list of baseline themes. These themes were used to structure the coding process (Sullivan-Bolyai et al., 2005). The following acronyms were used to indicate participants' role in the program: field liaison (FL), student (S), or faculty advisor (FA).

Results

Several important themes emerged from the interviews with current and alumni students, faculty at Tribal and community colleges, and the field advisor liaisons. These key themes and related subthemes are found in Table 1.

Table 1: Main Themes and Subthemes

Main Themes	Subthemes
Type of Student in the Program	
Why Students Joined the Program	
Strengths of the Program	Native American Focus Tools and Encouragement to Succeed Strong Curriculum
Sense of Community	Suggestions for Improvement Connection to the Program Impact of the Program on Rural and Native American Communities

Type of Student in the Program: “They’re not your 18 to 22-year-olds.”

Interviewees described those enrolled in the distance learning program as often differing in comparison to students pursuing on-campus degrees in regard to age, life situation, and prior experience with social work.

(FA4): A lot of my students are non-traditional-aged students, they have kids in school, they have jobs, they’re tied to this community. A lot of my students are in recovery [for substance use], and they’re tied to the recovery community here and they don’t want to relocate.

Distance students tend to be established adults with personal and professional roots in their community. Additionally, many of these students have children for whom they are financially responsible.

(S3): Right now I’m doing...basically two jobs. The unpaid internship during the day, and then the evenings and late evenings, I work at my son’s daycare. After I leave the daycare, which is about nine o’clock at night a weekday, I do my homework and budget my time for two to three hours to get stuff going for school.

Other student interviews allude to the fact that many if not most distance students are also juggling financial responsibilities while in school.

(S5): I have to be careful because people look at you like, “oh, well, lucky you.” I do realize I am lucky [that] in order to have a roof over my head and eat, I do not have to have a full-time job. To me, I think that opens up what I can do and what I would like to do.

Differences in income and access to resources was echoed by other students. One student described living rurally and experiencing resource shortages frequently.

(S3): Some students didn't even know how it was to go couple days without water.... Some... didn't know how it was to live without electricity, or running water for that fact. I was just like, "I don't know if I should be envious or pity you," because it's [knowing how to survive without these things] [is] like basic knowledge, basic living.

Distance students come from a wide range of income levels and communities with differing access to resources.

Although having children and financial obligations or living rurally could be viewed as a challenge, both faculty and student descriptions highlighted the invaluable strengths related to having had life experience and additional responsibilities (FA3):

I found that the students over here, they're a little older and they work really hard to get things done. They're dedicated in what they do, their homework and anything else that is out there that they need to get done. They're ready to go. They're ready.

Additionally, staff and faculty noted how helpful it was to work with students with prior experience in the field (FS1): *"They've been really prepared to engage with clients...many of them had already worked in the field a little bit already, so they brought those skills."*

Based on faculty and staff descriptions, distance students are (FA2) *"not your 18 to 22-year-olds"* but established adults with additional responsibilities and prior life experiences. They also have varied financial responsibilities and income levels. These aspects of students' identities are viewed positively by themselves and others. These quotes suggest that the distance program is successfully enrolling students from surrounding communities and rural areas, and of differing economic backgrounds. One faculty supervisor noticed the difference between a student with no background experience and those that know more than (FS2) *"your typical bachelor's level student."*

Why Students Joined Program: "I think I'm going to be a social worker,' because that's what I want to do. I want to help people and help my communities"

Students described themselves as being motivated to join the distance learning program out of a desire to help others (S3): *"I said, 'I think I'm going to be a social worker,' because that's what I want to do. I want to help people and help my communities, wherever I'm at, at that time."* This student expressed deep commitment to service, particularly as it would benefit those in their community even if that community changed. This sense of commitment was echoed by other students, who expressed a desire to give back. One such student made a powerful statement describing their desire to help support Tribal nations.

(S3): That's one thing is that, we're always told, "Oh, [getting a SW degree] can help you get a better paycheck." That's not why I'm doing this...We're trying to help the Nation of people. We can't do that if we just have a high school education. We can, maybe, but we're not going to get too far.

This student describes their motivation to attend the distance learning program as tied to a larger mission of improving outcomes for their community. The (S3) “*Nation of people*” connotes the student's commitment to Tribal sovereignty and attending school as means towards protecting and ensuring that sovereignty. Other students echoed this desire to do something good for their community (S5): “*Once I started back at [community college name omitted] I thought about the addictions counseling...I wanted to do something in a field where I felt like I was doing some good in some way.*”

Faculty and staff perspectives on why students join the program echoed student descriptions.

(FA2): *Probably career advancement for the ones who are already working in social services. Other than that, I'd probably say wanting to do something in the community, we don't have the amount of services that we need here, [so] giving back may be the other reason.*

This faculty member states that some students likely attend for career advancement but also note that that might not be students' sole motive. For example, faculty point out that prior life experience has provided motivation for students (FA3): “*They're at that point now where . . .they've seen things, so now they want to make a difference.*”

A few students were planning on pursuing a Bachelor of Arts degree in another discipline but were drawn to the BSW distance learning program for specific reasons. For example, this student decided to pursue a BSW because they felt it provided more professional possibilities.

(S6): *Basically in the way that my advisor...explained it to me, they're like you could do a whole lot more with the social work degree than you can with a psychology degree and I would have more leniency in the way I can do individual practice depending on how I wanted to go about that and even getting like certification. I liked that aspect...ultimately if it's a better option for me.*

They chose to enroll in the BSW distance learning program because they felt like it offered more diverse options as compared to a psychology degree.

Another student changed directions in school and enrolled in the distance learning program because it felt like a better fit professionally.

(S8): *Well, I was in the nursing program, I didn't feel like it was a good fit for me because I really had wanted to be a community nurse. I didn't want to be doing all the surgical rotations and ICU rotations, I wanted to work on preventative care before people got to that part. I didn't like the whole hospital system and I knew I had to put in all of those things to get to the community part.*

This student knew they were committed to preventative work on the community level and did not feel that this type of work was consistent with the current medical system.

Strengths of Program: “You’re not going to get that somewhere else.”

Strengths of the program identified by students included (a) a focus in the curriculum on Native American issues and an inclusive and anti-racist atmosphere towards Native American students; (b) tools and encouragement to succeed professionally, and (c) a strong curriculum more generally. Strengths of the program identified by faculty and staff included closeness among students, strong partnerships with other programs, and an emphasis on social justice. Both types of interviewees mentioned the importance and value of the programs’ accessibility and role in fulfilling a mental health care shortage.

Native American Focus. Students described the distance learning program as (S2) “*embracing of all the cultures.*” In particular, students described feeling welcome in the program as compared with other schools (S3):

On every syllabus that is distributed for each course now, it is required, at a minimum, that you do a land acknowledgment for...the nearest Tribe there. Here in [city name omitted], the nearest Tribe is my enrolled Tribe...[in their previous education experience before joining the program] they shoved us in a room in the bottom of this building in this basement. It was like an office, but it was the bottom. I’m like, “We couldn’t have the top?...Why are we in this basement and this room? It makes no sense.” Then here, now, UM has its own building. It’s so beautiful.

In response to being asked about the institution’s treatment and regard towards Native American students, this individual notes how much this has changed over time. They also described the negative experiences they have had with other universities and emphasize how they value this college’s steps towards ensuring Native American students feel welcome.

As Native American students, cultural sensitivity was an important quality in faculty. One student suggested, (S3) “*maybe just looking more in depth into the Native communities and seeing how they are. The reason why [program director name omitted] is so successful is because she has years of experience working with Native people.*” That same student commended another faculty member as well, “*She was great, because she has years of experience and was able to give us a perspective on how Native peoples, the communities are. They’re all different, trust me.*” Other students echoed this sentiment and pointed out that focusing on Native American issues throughout the curriculum was a strength (S3): “*Geez, education-wise, they now allow instruction of just different topics related to Native American social justice issues.*”

Another major strength of the program as described by a student was the balance between being pushed to grow and provided the tools necessary to do so (S3): “*You need to do the work. They’ll give you the tools, but you have to do it as a student because they just can’t do everything for you. You’re not going to learn social work and advocacy just writing papers. You got to be out there learning it, applying it.*” In this excerpt, the student states how the program provided the necessary support for them to learn on their own. They go on to describe how this balance between autonomy and support gave them the confidence to pursue opportunities (S3): “*I just attended a conference that had Wyoming, Canada and all this regarding the reservations here, Tribal leaders. I got to sit at the table, for once in my life, and I got to ask questions.*” This quote

suggests that while the distance learning program is helping students build concrete skills, it is also aiding with self-development as students become professionals in the field of social work. The excerpts above indicate how invaluable this aspect of the program is for Native American students in particular by providing a curriculum that is relevant and culturally attuned.

Tools and Encouragement to Succeed. Support from distance learning program staff and instructors, faculty advisors, and peer cohesion and support were described as being instrumental for students. Students appreciated support and guidance through transitions. One student said.

(S3): If I needed to email [name omitted] to say, "Hey, I need you to go to the financial aid office again. They're messing with me," she's always answering. She'd say, "Just hold on, we got this." She affirmed how I was feeling. She gave me validation because I was upset for half this semester. That's how it was.

Faculty and staff quotes speak to the importance of closeness among cohorts in forming confidence as well (FA2): *"When they have that familiarity with each other, and that can help that confidence and they'll speak more in class when they have that."* This faculty member describes how being comfortable with one's peers helps to build assurance in the classroom.

Faculty also expressed a positive relationship to the distance learning program and the University of Montana more broadly. According to one practicum AFI (FS1), *"I think the University of Montana is the only program where I'm actually monitoring or approving hours. I have no idea what any of my other practicum students or interns were saying were their hours. It could have been accurate or not, and I had no means of affirming."* They also go on to note that they value the School of Social Work's orientation towards social justice (FS1): *"the social justice component of the curriculum that folks are learning at the University of Montana is by far the strongest."* In addition to providing strong structure and support for field liaisons, participants described the program's social justice orientation as a strength.

Faculty noted that the distance program as a partnership with the institution is well thought out and served a unique and valuable role as a skill-based degree.

(FA1): Well, there's a clear need, and the students who want to go into the mental health field somehow or another, this is something they can do with an undergraduate degree. You don't necessarily have to go on and get a master's like you might with psychology. There's like a bunch of jobs for them....[from an] administrative standpoint, especially at a community college, there's this workforce need and we're meeting it...The strengths identified in this quote were that there is a clear need for social workers, that the degree provides a skill-based profession, and that it provides employment opportunities following graduation. That the program exists and was accessible was a strength in itself that was identified by faculty and students alike.

As noted by a student, this flexibility and affordability provided opportunities that would not otherwise exist.

(S2): *I would like to say just I'm glad there's the distance learning program for people like me. I never thought that I would actually go back to school. I always wanted to go back to school, but I couldn't really fit into my schedule, because I'm a single mom. I work full time, and it's affordable. Those are the things that I like about it.*

In addition to some of the previous strengths of the program, being able to complete the program while working and being a parent was described as an important reason for being in the program.

Sense of Community: “How can you and I make sure that we’re not ships passing in the nighttime?”

The importance of community was described as being a tool that helped students succeed in the program. Faculty members also shared ideas for ways to further build connection between faculty advisors at different community and Tribal colleges throughout the state. According to one faculty advisor one approach to take would be.

(FA2): *I think any opportunity to get people talking and get to know each other is probably helpful. I don't know if that could be just a zoom meeting where we're not going to talk about the program or business or anything. We're just going to talk, we're just going to get to know each other. We're going to share things about ourselves. We're going to talk about what our dreams are.*

Another faculty member similarly agreed that having intentionality in your communication with students and staff can create greater connections (FA4): *“if we're just a little more proactive about it...I would love to be able to talk and say, “Hey, I'm going into fall 2022, how can you and I make sure that we're not ships passing in the nighttime?”...That's something that we can work on.”*

Students and faculty reflected on ways to make the online learning community stronger. One student highlights the value of an in-person meeting (S6):

There was a lot of Zoom meetings which it did help, but it became more like a chore after a while, so the in person stuff it would've been a lot more fun, because of COVID it [an annual visit to the UM campus that used to occur] didn't happen the year that everyone went in sadly, so it's like we never got the experience.

A faculty member also described how sharing experiences as students and faculty can also aid in bringing about connections (FA2):

When I teach my classes, especially on zoom, and I'm like, “Okay, I got to engage them.”... I would also say that goes two ways...[program director name omitted], if she's leading it, for example, to share herself as a person. To share her vulnerabilities of what it was for her to start this skill, maybe times when she was the student and was insecure. Challenges that she faced and what she did, because I feel they connect more to when I'm vulnerable.

Some students expressed a desire for more community building with their instructors. The following students expanded on their feelings of disconnection with the faculty and ideas for improvement. (S8): *“We're so disconnected there, that I don't think the structure is correct for the*

policy work... I feel like the instructor could have just released our assignments on day one and I would already be done with my semester because there's no feedback or try to do this." This student highlights the importance of regular and thoughtful feedback and connection with their faculty.

Another student describes how discourse and feedback with other students would help provide a sense of connection.

(S5): There's not that other perspective from other students. I think I miss that. I miss the talking and if nothing else, if there's a way to pair up. Make us pair up more...It's hard...I understand that it's meant to be an online program but I wish there was a little more.

Although the program is asynchronous, this student expressed a desire to connect with their student peers and noted that this is an important part of the learning process. This student believes that the initial energy brought into the program should be held throughout the program to help provide connection and meaning (S5): *"I think that initial intro into the program in the fall, that needs to be throughout the whole program. That kind of feel. We are so excited to have you. This is a unique program. I'm glad you're part of it'...That needs to be continued on and it just wasn't this semester."*

Former students providing support was also described as being an important form of support. Several of those who were interviewed agreed that having previous students provide their insight and advice would be especially helpful.

(FA3): They [the incoming distance students] all know that when they go to the university that it's going to be online. It's up to them to figure out. I've had my previous students come in and talk to my students and give them an idea about what they need to do, how they need to prepare, and how important it is to have a schedule and follow that schedule.

This was also emphasized by this faculty member with an added idea of recording these graduates as a resource that could be utilized for several years.

(FA2): I'm wondering if there would be something that the program could do where the graduates that we have could make some video or something, sharing what they got from the program, what it was like, including the challenges and how they overcame it. Info about how they need to be, what they need to do to prepare. That's something I can share in my classes. We can watch it together. I feel like they respond better in front of that.

Students described that they are willing and excited to be able to help future students realize what they are capable of.

(S2): I think with the ones that are graduating me and [name omitted], I think if we were able to get involved and get the word out more, I think people from our community would see that we did it and they would more likely want to pursue that because they're looking at us like, 'Oh, they did it. I could do that.' I think if we worked together collaborating, I think that might actually help.

Other students noted the importance of having a program director who was invested in Native American communities and had a deep knowledge of their history in Montana (S3): *“The reason why [program director name omitted] is so successful is because she has years of experience working with Native people.”*

Suggestions for Improvements. Ideas for how to improve and further facilitate face time and connection with the campus and staff was discussed in several ways. This interviewee discussed the possibility of regional meet ups (FA3): *“That might work also, because that way, the distance students could form a little bond there with each other in different parts of the state there. Yes, that would be a good idea too.”* While others suggested that students travel to the UM or having instructors come and visit.

(FA3): *“I know before COVID, it [visiting the campus to help build rapport and connection between students and the state college] was working out really good because we took the students over there, and [name of program director omitted] and them would come over here, so that helped out also to meet with all the students. That worked out good.”* These perspectives highlight the important role that community played for students in the program, in addition to noting areas where this could be improved further.

Relationship to Program: “I think [it] helps you feel connected, if you feel like you're in the right program for you”

Students expressed a wide variety of relationships with the UM and the distance learning program. Students who expressed feeling close ties to the UM most often stated that this was due to having a personal connection with campus, either because they had attended the UM before or because a family member had. For example, one student stated that they (S7) *“bleed maroon”* and that (S7) *“the University of Montana is almost a sense of pride because it's been in my blood for my entire life.”* This student's family grew up in Missoula and they felt a close tie for that reason. Another student stated, (S5) *“I love the University of Montana because I went there prior and had such good memories.”* They went on to report that without this prior connection, however, being a student of the distance learning program may not provide a close tie to the institution.

(S5): *I feel connected to it, but I don't know that you necessarily feel like you're—it just feels like an online program, to be honest. I have a connection and I love the University of Montana and I'm grateful that after all these years, hopefully, I will finally get that diploma from UM, but I think if I didn't already have that, it would just be an online program.*

Both these statements suggest that having a personal connection with the UM outside the distance learning program resulted in students feeling close ties with campus but that the distance learning program itself, did not bolster this relationship. For a student who does not have personal ties with the state university, this holds true (S6): *“It's so weird because, I don't identify with either UM or my community college, I mainly identify as a distance student.”* For this interviewee, the distance learning program has provided a stronger sense of identity as compared with the institution or local college.

Faculty noted how important having face-to-face experiences were for forming a tie to the institution.

(FA4): Hopefully, we can get back to that, where we can have that face-to-face connection with the folks at UM. I think prior to COVID, the students really liked having that opportunity [to go to campus]. I think they were excited to have that opportunity to see them [social work faculty and students] in person, in the flesh, and connect with them . . . I think those are two different experiences. I think that they have the benefit of being able to stay in the community and just continue along with their daily lives and have this degree completion option. I think that they get to have that parallel experience of being able to go down and play college student for a day. . . For students, I think when they can say like, "Yes, I'm getting my bachelor's degree. I'm doing this great thing and I'm tied to this university." The more that we can foster that, I think, the better. I think that it is appreciated when they can go down and have that experience.

This faculty member noted how important it was for students to have the opportunity to have in-person experiences in order to form a connection with and pride in the institution.

Interestingly, student reports indicated that while forming a connection to professors was important (discussed previously) forming a relationship with the institution was not a priority.

(S8): I don't really feel part of the University of Montana. That doesn't bother me. I don't have a negative feeling about them. I feel like the tuition is priced fine for distance learning. I'm not looking for a college experience. I can't argue with that. I think that that is fine. That works for me.

As suggested by this student, the type of connection distance students seek is likely different than that commonly experienced by younger undergraduates, entering college for the first time. As established adults seeking career advancement, the (S8) "college experience" is not something they have sought in a program.

Impact of Distance Learning Program on Community: "What are you guys doing to help the people back home?"

Interviewees also described the unique impact of the distance learning program on students' communities. This included the positive impact of being in the program for Native American students, and their desire to continue working in their community following graduation, and broader general impacts on improving rural communities that students came from. Students noted the impactful ways the distance learning program influenced them and their communities, directly or indirectly. Native American students discussed the importance and power of making connections with other Native American students and learning about Native American professionals in the community. One Native American student in describing impact of the distance learning program stated.

(S3): It makes me feel good as a student because sometimes I feel alone out here. We're a low minority. We're under-represented. These Native students you see in this program are the 1% overall. Even the graduating ones, literally like 1%. You go to a reservation,

you hardly see anyone with the higher education level. They usually stop at high school if they even get there. It's great. I love seeing that because it gives me encouragement like, "Oh, hey, I am going to do a difference. I am going to sit at that table one day. That's what I want to do, is advocate for change. That's what I want to do. I want to see that change before I die.

This student points out how disproportionately underrepresented Native American students are in higher education but indicates that witnessing other Native American students and professionals succeed is a major strength of the program. Their description emphasizes how this experience motivates them to graduate and represent Native American communities.

This quote speaks to the program's ability to contribute to a counternarrative of resilience. Despite the low graduation rate among Native communities, this student and other Native students in the program are succeeding in school. They also reference being connected with other Native American community members who have succeed in social work. This student states this has had a profound positive impact on them and has encouraged them to work hard towards their goal of influencing change.

Students also spoke to feeling committed to community and wanting to use their skills and education gained in the program to benefit those around them.

(S3): I want to open a center...just make help available to all of those—I want to assist people with TANF applications or [to] know the legalities. I want to try to hire an attorney and try to help with legal situations for victims or that nature. I want to provide counseling services for those who can't afford it or just don't know what resource to go to. I want to have a resource office one day so that they can get these resources within [area name omitted] here. That's what I want to do. That's the goal here.

This student's statement demonstrates their drive and passion. It also shows how the distance learning program has provided a clear path and support for translating this passion into action.

Students graduating from the distance learning program would like to give back to their community in a variety of ways. This student would take a more general approach to offering assistance to their community. (S3): *"One day, I would like to open a resource center available to anybody and everybody in the community where I'm at. See, I'm from different places, like different reservations."* Another student found meaning working with the elderly population and teaching parenting classes.

(S5):" I've tossed around working with the elderly and that time for family members to make decisions toward the end. I tossed around the VA because my husband's a vet...Truthfully, I would love to even teach classes. Teach a class of, hey moms, this is what we do. This is kind of some tips or check in on, that kind of thing. I don't know what that looks like but I think I would really enjoy that.

This student would like to work specifically with mothers and children, addressing the childcare system in this country.

(S5): I think moms and kids. I think their backs are against the wall everywhere they turn around. They're leaving their jobs to Zoom with their kids. They can't afford childcare. Any assistance we give them, there's so many conditions on it. Don't make too much money or you're not going to get the assistance. You better have a job or you're not going to get the help. If I could tackle universal preschool, if I could tackle daycare, childcare, that's a nightmare in our country.

These quotes highlight the broad possibilities viewed by students graduating with a distance learning degree.

As indicated by student statements throughout this manuscript, the distance learning program provides educational opportunities that are valuable to Native American and rural students. Faculty also report that the distance learning program fills an important need and has a positive impact, stating (FA1): *"It's really good for the community. Gets a lot of people trained, although, we have a long way to go."* This faculty member notes that the program is making strides but that there are opportunities for growth as well.

Discussion

The strengths of this program as described by participants include: 1) offering a curriculum that is relevant for Native American students and a learning environment that is inclusive; 2) establishing authentic partnerships with Tribal and community colleges; 3) providing the support and tools necessary for students and faculty to succeed; and 4) having a strong social justice orientation. Student participants described the curriculum as having a focus on Native American issues, which was valued as an important education for practicing social work throughout the state. Native American students also spoke about feeling included in the program in comparison to other experiences they have had in the past or with other universities. Students expressed the importance of faculty being knowledgeable of Tribal communities and attributed their past experience working throughout Montana as essential to the program's success. Authentic engagement by faculty in program development, partnership building, and via teaching is a major strength of the program.

Participants described the program as encouraging students to be self-driven, while also ensuring they have the necessary tools to succeed. Both students and staff described receiving support when elicited. For field liaisons, a strong sense of organization and accountability was a unique strength of the program as well as its' focus on social justice issues. Finally, that the program expanded educational and employment opportunities and has helped fill specific workforce needs, was also named as a strength.

This research helps fill an important gap in literature investigating the potential of remote learning to improve workforce gaps in rural and underserved communities. Quotes from students and faculty demonstrate how identity and desire to serve one's community contributes to students' resilience and motivation to achieve a social work degree. For Native American student participants in particular, tie to one's community and the potential to make a positive impact was described in this study as influential in their decision to pursue a BSW and in forming their future career goals. Participant quotes demonstrate that this program has positively affected communities in indirect ways as well. In addition to expanding education access and helping to

fill workforce gaps, the distance learning program has provided opportunities for students to connect with one another and to see each other succeed. This has been especially beneficial for Native American students by providing powerful opportunities to resist colonialist narratives and revise disheartening statistics

There are several areas of growth for this program. Student and faculty participants spoke to the importance of bolstering a sense of community by improving communication between faculty and students and between alumni and current attendees. The potential benefits of building these connections were creating a broader social work community and helping to pass down institutional knowledge to new students. Suggested methods for improving communication were bringing back in-person meetings (halted during the height of the pandemic) and having alumni speak to new students on Zoom. Faculty and staff participants also described needing to improve communication amongst themselves to better serve students.

The results strongly suggest that student fit plays an important role in determining their success in the program. Both students and faculty described how the program encourages autonomy and necessitates students to be self-driven. In particular, students are required to have a certain level of digital literacy and to engage in self-paced work. For many participants, previous life experiences or their role as a caregiver are highly motivating and an online structure is not a major barrier. However, distance learning may not be a good fit for students who are entering college out of high school or who have limited experience with technology.

This study has several implications for future social work distance learning programs. The partnerships between Tribal and community colleges and the larger state university has provided an opportunity for students to remain in their communities and receive adequate support. As stated by participants, the ability to stay in one's community was a significant factor in their decision to pursue higher education. These partnerships have largely been successful because of past relationships built over time by the program director. This faculty member's emersion in rural and Tribal communities was noted by participants as essential to this program's development and success. Future programs may benefit from gaining a similar level of knowledge of, and experience with, the communities they seek to serve.

Partnerships between community colleges and four-year institutions have been especially helpful for improving retention rates, encouraging students to achieve bachelor's degrees, and sharing resources (Mobelini, 2013). In addition to providing these benefits, relationship building and partnerships across the state have helped build a relevant curriculum focused on Native American communities. The results of this study demonstrate that this distance learning program has been successful in reaching rural students and students on Tribal lands and providing them with the necessary tools and opportunity to contribute to their communities in innovative ways.

Limitations and Future Research

We believe that this research contributes unique data to social work scholarship surrounding distance learning programs. We also recognize that the results of this study highlight the need to adapt individual programs to meet the needs of the specific communities served. Social work educators may need to engage in additional research and partnership building to develop programs that are congruent with the student population they seek to reach. Future scholarship

would benefit from investigating student perspectives at the beginning and end of the program as well. Although we made efforts to gain student perspectives over an extended period of time, all interviews in this study were cross-sectional. We were not able to elicit the views of all students, faculty, and staff. However, we believe that by interviewing participants from a variety of colleges, myriad perspectives and experiences are represented. While there does exist potential selection bias, participants geographical diversity may mitigate this limitation. and there exists potential selection bias as well

Conclusion

This study investigates a BSW distance learning program in the Western United States through semi-structured interviews of students, faculty, and staff. Using a qualitative descriptive methodology, these interviews were analyzed with a low-level of interpretation. This research fills an important gap in literature investigating the potential of distance learning programs to reach rural and Native American students. The results indicate that students' identity and fit with the program have played a major role in their motivation to pursue a degree and career goals. In developing distance learning programs for rural and Native American students, schools of social work could benefit from building authentic partnerships with Tribal and community colleges and continuing to build avenues for communication amongst faculty and students.

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