

Recognizing the Importance of Gerontological Practice Skills: Potential Strategies for MSW Students

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One of the most pressing imperatives in social work education today is preparing future practitioners to work effectively with the burgeoning and increasingly diverse older population. Given anticipated changes in demographic patterns, the majority of social workers in every practice setting will be serving culturally diverse older adults across multiple generations. Indeed, even as early as 1990, 62 percent of the members of the National Association of Social Workers reported that gerontological expertise was necessary for effective service delivery in their positions, regardless of practice setting. In spite of this, student interest in preparing for practice with older adults is often limited since they may not be aware of the need for aging knowledge and skills until they begin working in the field. As such, a primary strategy social work educators have used to increase student interest in aging is to educate them regarding the relative importance of gerontological skills and knowledge across all fields of practice.

This research is part of a larger study designed to measure the effectiveness of a three-tiered gerontology curriculum infusion model in stimulating positive change in MSW students' value perceptions, skills, and knowledge regarding gerontological and multigenerational social work practice. Surveys were administered to a cohort of MSW students at three key points during the two-year graduate program: the beginning of the first year, the end of the first year, and the end of the second year. A component of the survey assessed students' perceptions regarding the importance of gerontological curriculum content and gerontological skills and knowledge to social work in general and to their own social work careers.

Results yielded an unexpected finding: students were consistently aware of the importance of gerontological skills and knowledge to the social work profession as a whole, but were less aware of the value of such skills and knowledge to their own social work careers. This was true even though the majority of students reported plans to work in multigenerational settings that traditionally serve a large proportion of older clients, such as health care, mental health, and child welfare. This finding suggests that unlike earlier cohorts, current students are now cognizant of the relative importance of aging issues to social work in general; the disconnect exists in their understanding of the applicability of these issues to their own fields of practice. While in the past we may have needed to educate students regarding the need for aging content, today we must demonstrate the linkage between gerontology and students' other substantive areas of interest. Next steps include exploring potential interventions to enable students to make this connection, such as utilizing a multigenerational practice framework.