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Increasing Access to Graduate Education: A Blended MSW Program

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Abstract

Students who live in remote areas and have work and family responsibilities frequently face considerable challenges completing graduate education. Accredited programs in their professional field may be several hundred miles away, on campuses where traditional face-to-face programs are the primary – if not the only – options available. This means considerable windshield (driving) and seat (classroom) time that their situations make prohibitive. At the same time, new technological developments and continued research and experience have made quality online learning feasible in many fields. Nevertheless, there is still a strong bias to have adequate face-to-face elements in the preparation of professionals for whom face-to-face contact with clients will be the norm.

This combination of student need, technological feasibility, and a professional bias toward face-to-face instruction provides the perfect environment for a "blended" program that combines the best features of face-to-face, videoconferencing, and online instruction. The Michigan State University Blended Statewide Clinical Master of Social Work (MSW) Program was developed to respond to the serious access issues facing students in areas of the state where accredited master's programs are either too far away or do not provide flexibility in course load and scheduling. In this article, the program's underlying assumptions are explained and the primary components of the Blended Program model are described in detail. It should be noted that this is not just a theoretical model – it has, in fact, been implemented, with the first cohort of students in the third year of the three-year MSW program. Results to date are presented.

Introduction

Online learning has continued to expand its position in the higher education arena. In fact, the latest data indicate that close to four million students were enrolled in at least one online course in Fall 2007, a 12.6 percent increase over the number reported the previous year (Allen & Seaman, 2008). Although offerings of blended courses decreased slightly between 2003 and 2005 while online course offerings grew, there are a slightly larger percent of blended program offerings than online programs across all disciplines (Allen, Seaman, & Garrett, 2007, emphasis added). In this article we will examine the importance of improved student access to educational resources as a force driving the increase in both online and blended courses and programs, and discuss challenges and potential benefits of these approaches. We will then describe the origins and implementation of one graduate professional master's program using a blended learning approach designed to improve student access.

Access Issues

Results of a survey of over 2,500 colleges and universities presented in the fifth annual report on U.S. online learning show that " improving student access is the most often cited objective for online courses and programs" (Allen & Seaman, 2007, p. 2). Furthermore, Allen & Seaman (2007) report that this is the top reason noted by all of the different types of institutions included in the study. The most recent data (for 2007) indicate that both chief academic officers and online teaching faculty rated the need for flexible access above other motivations for teaching online presented to them (Allen & Seaman, 2008).

Access, however, can be defined in many ways and include many different dimensions. As is commonly understood in the context of the growth of online and blended learning, the "access issue" generally incorporates the idea that large numbers of students confront challenges in pursuing higher education courses and programs due to factors such as:

1) geographical barriers – they simply live "too far" from the physical location of a campus providing traditional (i.e., face-to-face in a classroom) courses and programs; these geographical barriers can be expressed in terms of mileage (e.g., living 100 miles away from campus in a rural area) and/or driving time (living in urban areas but an hour-or more commute from the target campus);

2) employment/time availability barriers – regardless of how far away they live, some potential students work full-time jobs or even two jobs, making it difficult to allocate time on a fixed schedule to attend face-to-face classes for a specific period of time; and

3) family and community responsibilities – regardless of how far away they live, some potential students have a combination of family and community responsibilities that make attendance at and participation in traditional classes in a specific geographic site on a fixed schedule very difficult if not impossible.

The literature is filled with reports about the importance of access. Braun (2008) notes that "students' desire for flexibility outweighing the apparent need for instructor and peer interaction as one of the driving reasons behind enrollment in an online course" (p. 63). Tamburri (2004) notes that what students seek "above all else is the flexibility to pursue their studies when they want and where they want, while they continue to work and raise their families" (¶ 1). The United States Distance Learning Association (n.d.) notes that there are issues of equity, cost, and convenience to potential students. Kennedy (2008) suggests that expectations of potential students, especially adult learners, "include the ability to have their education tailored around their needs — courses they can take when and where they want, and at a pace that fits their lifestyle" (¶ 4), but he does note realistically that there is a continuum of program types ranging from those with more specific demands and structure to those with fewer demands and more options for choice in content. Ostrow and DiMaria-Ghalili (2005) comment that for nursing students the combination of fulltime employment, parenting, and school leads to the inevitable conclusion that "time is a precious commodity" (p. 5), another aspect of the access issue. In short, "students are seeking to reduce the costs, in terms of both time and money, of commuting to classes on campus" (McCracken, 2008, ¶ 11).

The types of issues described above are even more salient and problematic for graduate and professional education in fields like nursing (Ostrow & DiMaria-Ghalili, 2005; Stanton et al., 2005); pharmacy (Vuchetich, 2003); special education (Luna & Medina, 2007); and social work (Regan & Youn, 2008). T here are also examples of important access needs for various groups of students identified by geographic location such as rural areas (Ostrow & DiMaria-Ghalili, 2005) and island communities (University of Hawaii at Manoa, 2008); and by demographic/cultural characteristics (Oklahoma State University, 2008).

Potential Challenges

While many colleges and universities have successfully launched online courses and programs, reports in the literature suggest that there are additional challenges beyond simply offering courses on web sites. For students these challenges include:

- students need more discipline to succeed in online courses (Allen & Seaman, 2007)
- insufficient interaction with faculty can lead to lower rates of retention (Muller, 2008)
- the need to insure that their learning styles are appropriately matched to the online learning environment (Illinois Online Network, 2000)
- academic advising is often not available (Luna & Medina, 2007)
- unclear expectations for coursework (Stanton et al., 2005)
- lack of socialization (Stanton et al., 2005)
- less exposure to role models and local resources to support professionalization (Stanton et al., 2005)
- higher rates of dropping out (Tyler-Smith, 2006)
- financial aid challenges (Kennedy, 2008)
- challenges in the admissions process (Kennedy, 2008)
- computer competence, especially for technically advanced courses (Elliott & Kukula, 2007; Stanton et al., 2005; Tyler-Smith, 2006)
- greater time required for students to cover material online (Ostrow & DiMaria-Ghalili, 2005)
- 24/7 technology support (Ostrow & DiMaria-Ghalili, 2005)
- availability of adequate bandwidth (Ostrow & DiMaria-Ghalili, 2005)
- student need for prompt feedback on submitted work and questions (Ostrow & DiMaria-Ghalili, 2005)
- becoming familiar with the course management system (e.g., Blackboard, Angel, etc.) – structure, multiple levels, documents spread out in folders, etc. (Tyler-Smith, 2006)
- becoming familiar with new – sometimes very difficult – learning content (Tyler-Smith, 2006)
- becoming an e-learner – isolated, self-directed, no coffee conversations (Tyler-Smith, 2006)
- negotiating online 'classroom' interaction – dealing with strangers (Tyler-Smith, 2006)

For faculty the challenges include:

- teaching online takes more time and effort than teaching face-to-face courses (Allen & Seaman, 2007)
- many faculty have yet to accept the value of online instruction (Allen & Seaman, 2007)
- faculty workload (Stanton et al., 2005)
- need for ongoing faculty development (Stanton et al., 2005)
- student need for prompt feedback on submitted work and questions (Ostrow & DiMaria-Ghalili, 2005) but at the same time the expectations can be unrealistic (Li & Irby, 2008)
- need for technical skills and support (Li & Irby, 2008)
- becoming familiar with the course management system (e.g., Blackboard, Angel, etc.) – structure, multiple levels, documents spread out in folders, etc. (Tyler-Smith, 2006)
- 24/7 technology support (Ostrow & DiMaria-Ghalili, 2005)
- significant upfront planning and organization (Li & Irby, 2008)
- some materials may not translate well into digital formats (Li & Irby, 2008)

Administrative challenges include:

- coordination among all required academic, technology, and student support units (Hebert, 2007)
- coordination of adjunct instructors (Hebert, 2007)

- providing adequate library resources available 24/7 and everywhere (Slade, 2005)
- providing adequate student services (Hebert, 2007; Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003; Luna & Medina, 2007)

Potential Benefits

While the list of challenges identified in the literature is quite extensive, a number of important benefits have also been articulated. For example, students find that online courses and programs provide greater time flexibility, which translates into greater access to higher education (Li & Irby, 2008). Students also report that online courses provide greater access to their instructors by virtue of the asynchronous communication options (Stanton et al., 2005), especially because of the availability of frequent and timely feedback (Li & Irby, 2008). Faculty also see the advantage of increased access for students from online courses (Stanton et al., 2005). Finally, one of the consequences of fewer trips to physical locations for classes is that online courses and programs are more affordable (Li & Irby, 2008).

Perhaps of greatest importance is the fact that the overwhelming result from research and evaluation studies in the field is that there are no significant differences between face-to-face and online courses (Russell, 2009). Yet there is considerable discussion in the field about exactly what these findings mean, and whether they are in fact asking the right question (Oblinger & Hawkins, 2006; Shearer, 2002). The types of issues raised in analyses along these lines lead to the question of whether online courses and programs are the only – or even the better – option to address access issues while providing the best education that technology can support.

Why Might a Blended Approach Be Better Than Strictly Online?

A review of the challenges to online learning noted above reveals a number of important areas where a different approach – one combining some face-to-face elements along with online components – offer a possible solution that may result in more positive results (Martyn, 2003). Specifically, issues related to interaction and socialization with faculty and peers; dealing with learning in isolation or with strangers; the presence of role models and local resources; and the likelihood of increasing the match between student learning style and what is available in the course or program may all be better addressed by blended (also called hybrid) approaches.

What do we mean by blended learning? There are many definitions in the literature, and essential agreement that there is no one best way to combine the various elements that make up a "blend" (Cyrs & Conway, 1997). Some consider blended as a mix of synchronous and asynchronous content, including audio and video but without any face-to-face components (Regan & Youn, 2008). The definition used in Sloan-C studies is that a course is considered blended or hybrid if 30-79% of the content is delivered online, with some face-to-face meetings (Allen & Seaman, 2007). Sethy (2008) notes that blended learning brings together what appear on the surface to be "seemingly opposite approaches, such as formal and informal learning, face-to-face and online experiences, directed paths and reliance of self-direction, and digital references and group connections" (p. 32). For programs, blended can mean a combination of some courses on the web and others in traditional or web-assisted mode (Ostrow & DiMaria-Ghalili, 2005; University of South Florida, 2008), or it can combine online, face-to-face, and other types of technologies in all or most courses and in other components of the program (Graham, 2006).

At a very pragmatic level, there is the simple fact that not everything can be transformed to the online environment successfully. While small group discussions can be provided – and even enhanced – by online tools, Coyner and McCann (2004) note that " there may be certain content-related activities that does not lend itself to a web-based environment; role-playing may be best suited for face-to-face meetings" (p. 455). Yelon (2006) discusses when to teach in-person in blended courses in some detail.

Graham, Allen, and Ure (2005) suggest that blended learning approaches tend to be selected for three principal reasons: 1) improved pedagogy and educational outcomes, owing to the possibility of more

active learning components; 2) highly desired access and flexibility by offering reduced classroom time and commuting time to fixed locations without sacrificing all human interaction; and 3) higher cost-effectiveness because of the potential to expand component elements to multiple locations, and to draw on human resources to support the program from multiple locations.

An important reason for the strength of a blended approach lies in the potential for the development of a learning community in a blended course, and especially in a blended program. Hanna, Glowacki-Dudka and Conceicao-Runlee (2000) define learning communities as a "group of people who have come together to form a culture of learning in which everyone is involved in a collective effort of understanding" (p. 14). Schwier (2002) believes the idea of "community" describes "richer, deeper, more complex types of interplay among learners" (p. 1) than the notion of interaction, which does not begin to describe the significance of the relationships between the members of learning communities. DuCharme-Hansen and Dupin-Bryant (2005) believe that online learning communities are important because they help students learn and offer social support. They argue that "the common denominator in successful web-based courses is the people, not the technology" (p. 36). Thus, learning activities that help students see each other as human beings, with all the complications of human life, are useful.

The literature suggests that learning communities can help to address the issues of low course satisfaction and high drop-out that may be due to lack of community in courses that do not meet face-to-face (Ludwig-Hardman & Dunlap, 2003). Hill and Raven (2000) explore best practices for community building in online learning environments—students need to feel they are in a safe environment where trust is built and supported; students must feel a sense of cohesion (a "we're in this together" feeling); the course must be well-organized around the supporting technology; and communication must be encouraged and supported. Again, technology is used to enhance the courses, but the emphasis remains on the personal relationships.

Moisey, Neu, and Cleveland-Innes (2008) conducted a study of students in a computer-mediated graduate course and found significant correlation between satisfaction with the course and the strength of community cohesion. "Learning communities elevate distance instruction above isolated correspondence models. They provide interaction, support individual and collective learning, and promote a sense of belonging and mutual support" (Moisey, Neu, & Cleveland-Innes, 2008, p. 16). The authors argue that students need opportunities to get to know each other and the things they have in common as the notion of community implies social support, which ultimately promotes learning. Being in relationships and feeling a sense of connection increase the cohesiveness of the learning communities and may also enhance satisfaction with the learning experience itself. Cox and Cox (2008) argue that these relationships can extend to future classes and professional contacts.

Palloff and Pratt (2007) believe that learning communities, based on interaction between students and between students and faculty, are essential to the learning process in distance education. In fact, an "effective" learning community is the "vehicle through which learning occurs online" (Palloff & Pratt, 2007, p. 4). The authors devote an entire volume to strategies for building effective online learning communities and collaborative learning, arguing that learning communities meet the need for connectedness as well as enhancing acquisition of knowledge. Tyler-Smith (2006) suggests that "cognitive overload …is a likely contributor to high drop out rates, particularly in terms of those withdrawing within the first few weeks of the course start" (p. 73). He suggests the use of early face-to-face interactions and learning group formation to provide early structure and support to the learning process.

Kaplan (2002) believes it is the strength of the relationships that develop in learning communities that creates significant learning experiences for students and helps them learn collaboratively. These relationships are best developed using team-building activities face-to-face, thus building community (Kaplan, 2002). Kerres and DeWitt (2003) argue that student groups that have a face-to-face history

together, where they have established norms and roles, will be able to handle the online environment more comfortably. Thus, Brunner (2007) argues that a sense of community can be built if students are given the opportunity to interact face-to-face as the course begins. Such interactions help with group processes and enhance later online discussions. Garrison and Kanuka (2004) agree that it is useful for students to have face-to-face time together in order to build community as a way of launching the course.

Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, Robins, and Shoemaker (2000) describe a program where a "boot camp"—an intense face-to-face session that meets on campus and in which they complete a course in two weeks—helps students build a sense of community within a computer-supported master's level distance education program in library and information science. Because students interact often during those two weeks, they build the sense of community important to sustain them when they meet only online.

Misanchuk and Anderson (2001) also promote community by emphasizing communication and interaction and build in face-to-face interactions in an on-campus orientation to help students get to know each other. The authors believe that communication must be on a personal level (students should share information about their work, their families, their lives) as well as about course content and assignments.

Finally, McFarland and Hamilton (2005-6) recommend teams as way to promote collaborative learning and avoid isolation among students in online environment. Teams can help students learn and increase satisfaction with the course.

At the same time, the literature is clear that blended learning approaches are not without their challenges. Vaughn (2007) summarizes the challenges nicely:

For students:

- issues in time management
- taking greater responsibility for their own learning
- using sophisticated technologies

For faculty:

- lack of time, support, and resources for course redesign in a 'blended' format
- acquiring new teaching and technology skills
- risks associated with teaching a course in a new format

For administration:

- aligning blended learning with institutional goals and priorities
- resistance to organizational change
- lack of organizational structure and experience with collaboration and partnerships

On balance, however, the literature suggests that blended approaches may have some clear advantages over completely online approaches in certain situations. Given this literature on the potential advantages of a blended approach, what would be the organizing principles for a program attempting to take advantage of the multiple possibilities? In the next section we turn to the origins of a specific graduate masters in social work program designed to address the serious access challenges for potential students while also maximizing the potential benefits suggested by the blended learning literature.

Origins of the Blended Mentored Learning Community Model

In 2004, the distance learning program in the School of Social Work at Michigan State University (MSU) faced a dilemma. Interest and enrollments in our site-based distance education programs – where students completed all of their course work in one location using interactive video connections to faculty on the main campus – were decreasing, making it difficult to start a new program in any one location that would be financial feasible. Reports from potential students indicated that the demands of their work situations – with many working full time in social work settings – combined with their family responsibilities made a weekly commute to a site 50 miles away problematic. Taking time off from work to attend graduate school full time was impossible.

At the same time, there were other changes appearing in the environment. Faculty and administrative leaders were becoming familiar with the advances in online technology tools that could be utilized in combination with site-based, in-person, and interactive video resources. The social work profession was awakening to the importance of technology in social work practice, thereby lending support to the possibility – even the advantage – of using more technology in social work education (National Association of Social Workers & Association of Social Work Boards, 2005).

This combination of necessity and opportunity led to an administrative decision to form a core group of faculty charged with exploring the possibility of creating a blended program model for the Master of Social Work (MSW) curriculum. In doing so, the group was able to build on two essential foundational elements: 1) MSU's land grant mission that charges it with attending to the access needs of students throughout the state; and 2) MSU's and the School of Social Work's 25 years of experience in providing graduate social work education to locations throughout the state consistent with this land grant mission.

The decision to design a blended learning program rather than a completely online program was based upon some essential characteristics of social work education. Social work is a profession in which a license to practice is now required in all 50 states, and one of the requirements for licensure is a degree from a program accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (http://www.cswe.org/CSWE/). If potential students were to search for online social work programs at a site like e-learners (http://www.elearnersindex.com/) they would find several programs in human services (http://www.elearners.com/online-degrees/master/human-services.htm) but no master's degree in social work. All accredited MSW programs require almost 1,000 hours of supervised field education that simply cannot be done in any way other than in a face-to-face social work agency environment. Although there was at the time one MSW program that provided all required courses except field education online (http://ssw.fsu.edu/index.php?clickLink=online-offcampus), the faculty core group (FCG) was aware of the emerging literature on the challenges of faculty-student interactions in the online environment. Furthermore, the FCG was acutely aware of the resistance of faculty in the MSU School of Social Work to the concept of a totally online program.

Building a new program was thus based on several core values:

- Both as an ethical responsibility to students and as a requirement to maintain accreditation, the new program had to include components known to be important for quality education.
- Relationships are important to the learning process, and they are essential in social work practice.
- Interactions among all of the key players – students, faculty, mentors, advisers, and field agency personnel – must be supported and enhanced by technology to help initiate and sustain relationships.
- Teams and peer learning are essential building blocks in adult learning and must play a central role in the program.
- Modeling is an important part of social work education, and the program must provide effective mechanisms for modeling by faculty, field agency personnel, local practitioners, and peers.

- Mentoring is an effective tool for supporting the growth and development of professionals across fields, and mentors can play an important role in developing and sustaining learning communities.
- Technology is simply a tool to be used in support of all of the above; it must not drive the program.

The FCG realized in the early stages that several key areas of support had to be identified and committed to the program before any public announcement could be made or students recruited. There was keen awareness of the dangers of promising something to the public that could not be delivered subsequently, or that would be delivered poorly, thus damaging marketing prospects for several years (Cook & Ley, 2008). These areas are identified in Figure 1.

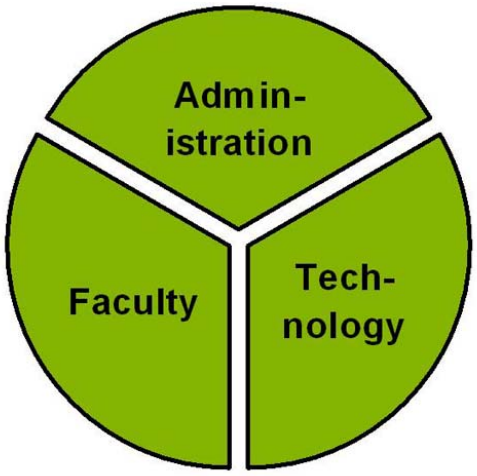

Figure 1: Core Resources Required for Program Launch

Administrative supports deemed to be critical included endorsements from the School of Social Work, the College of Social Science, and the Graduate School of the university. Endorsements with financial commitments were sought and obtained. On the technology side, the FCG was concerned about a variety of resources including a stable, user-friendly course management system; technical staff and resources to provide training to faculty in course redesign; adequate support for faculty and students related to the course management system during academic semesters and summer sessions; library resources that could be accessed online 24/7; production support for stand-alone video and audio lectures; and technical support for interactive video efforts to sites throughout the state.

The FCG knew that the faculty issue would be a bit of a challenge. Twelve years of operating distance education MSW programs using interactive video technology had revealed four types of faculty within the unit: those who were enthusiastic or at least open to teaching using emerging technology; some who were not excited, but who might be persuaded; some who were not at all interested in teaching in these formats themselves; and a small group who were opposed to teaching in this format, especially teaching the “clinical social work” courses that are at the heart of interpersonal or direct practice in social work (Regan & Youn, 2008). Given these realities, it was decided to begin the program with a small group of tenure-system and contract faculty for the first year courses, with the intent to recruit faculty as needed for subsequent years.

While establishing the connections and ensuring the support of these core resources, the FCG continued work on developing the model for the program, drawing on the conclusions of the literature noted above, technology resources available at MSU, and our own experience in distance learning. It was decided that the basic structure of the program would consist of five groups of five students each, with a mentor

assigned to each group, all connected to the faculty and other resources through a variety of technologies (see Figure 2).

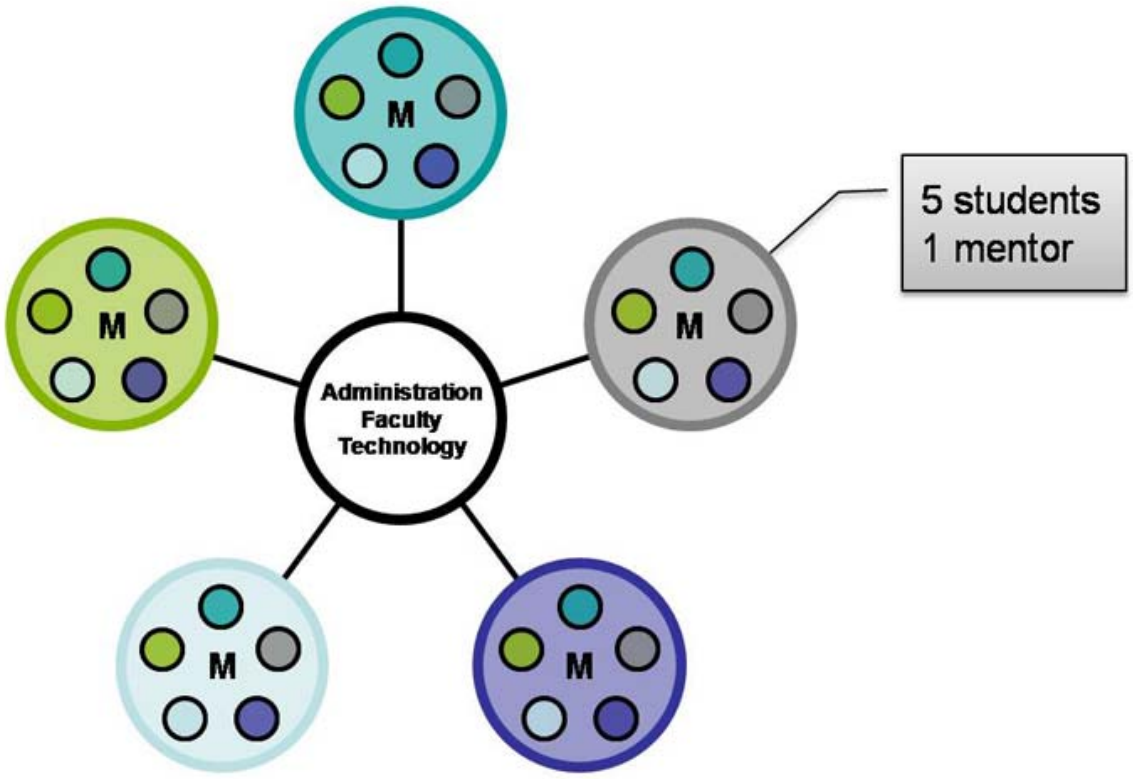

Figure 2: Basic Program Structure: 5 Students, 1 Mentor (M) Per Group

The decision to include a mentor for each learning community was based on our conviction, based on much of the literature cited above, that to be successful the program needed to provide a human point of contact for the students that was both geographically closer than the MSU campus faculty and staff, as well as structurally between the students and the faculty/administration of the program. Mentors were intended to be seasoned social work practitioners with experience in – or interest in developing – educational relationships with students as field advisers or supervisors. They were seen as providing a two-way intermediate level of contact between faculty and students in courses, and between the School and field placement agencies during the field education courses. In describing the mentor role at Florida State University, Thomas (2005) notes the key role that mentors play in enhancing interaction, providing the "high touch" aspect of the program that "might be even more important in the virtual campus than on the physical one" (p. 50).

For each student, the program thus was designed to provide several peers who would be together in each planned learning community, with a mentor assigned to each learning community to provide support and modeling. What was NOT specified in the design was the specific location of the five learning communities. Instead, it was the intent of the program to create these learning communities by dividing up an admitted cohort of 25 students into five groups based on their geographic location in the state. The goal was to admit the 25 most qualified students and then divide them into meaningful geographic clusters with the goal of reducing the amount of travel to the regional sites for the students. The only other requirement for the location of the five sites was that they had to have the capacity for a high quality interactive video linkage to MSU.

One additional element to the social work education model in general, as noted above, is the field education requirement for all students. In the MSW program, this requires two different field assignments and thus two different agency-based field instructors. Thus, a more complete picture of the human resources and the possible interactions and relationships within each of the learning communities is displayed in Figure 3.

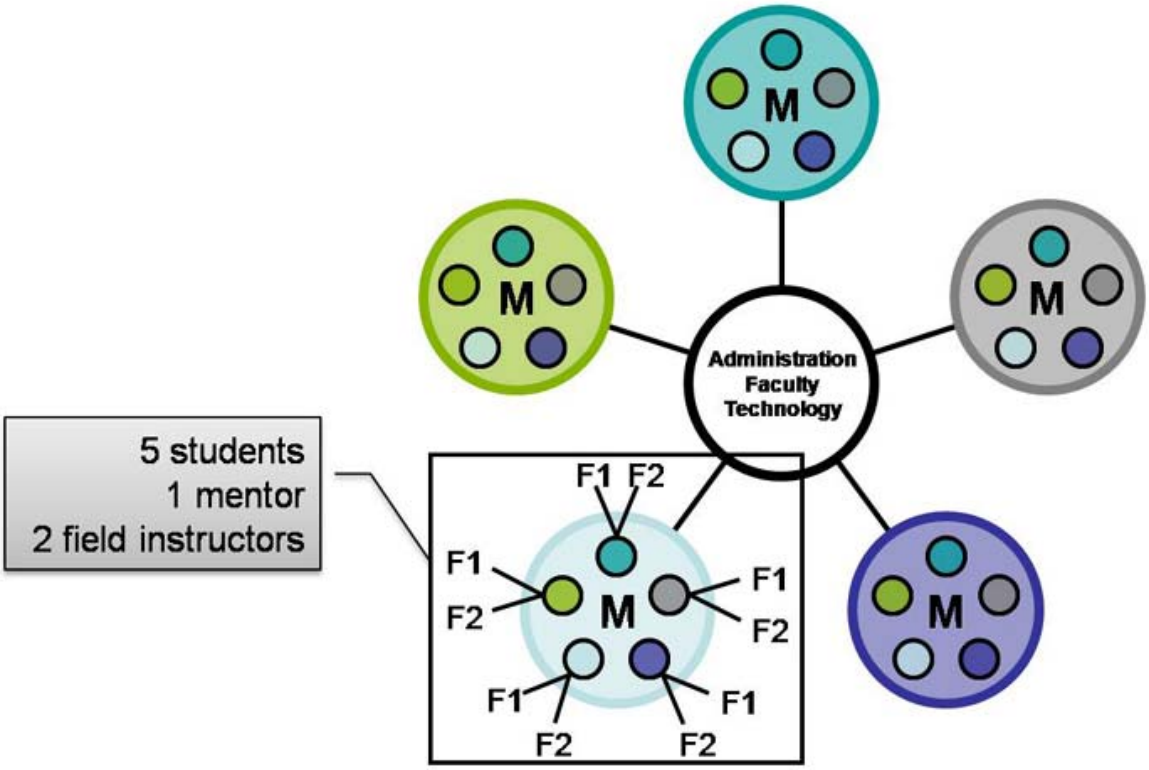

Figure 3: Regional Learning Community Components: 5 Students, 1 Mentor (M), and 2 Field Instructors (F1, F2) per group

Another way to view the potential for interactions and relations envisioned for each student is presented in Figure 4 below, where the focus is clearly on the individual student and the human resources intended to be available for support. It should be noted that the Field Coordinator is a staff member on the main MSU campus who supervises and supports all of the field placements for students in the Blended Program.

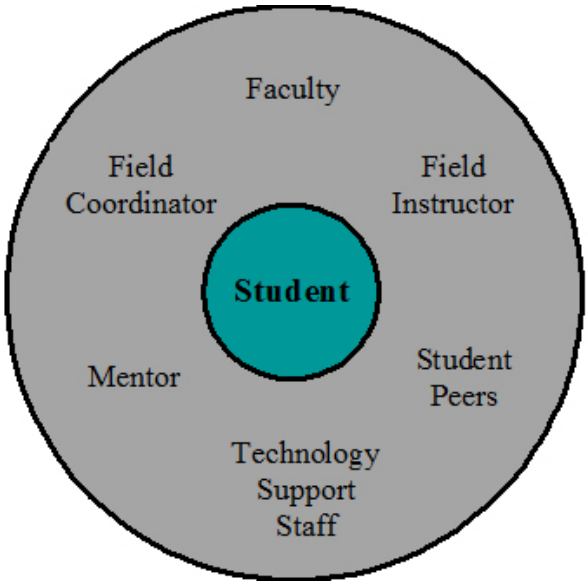

Figure 4: Human Sources of Support for Students

Implementation of the Model

When all of the pieces were put together, the Mentored Learning Community Model in the Blended Statewide Clinical MSW Program (https://www.msu.edu/~swdisted/statewide.html) was ready to be submitted for various approvals and then prepared for marketing. In this section these details are delineated and described.

The principal components of the Blended MSW Program include: 1) face-to-face instruction during the week-long Summer Institute that is held each June; 2) face-to-face instruction in small regional groups (the learning communities) one Saturday each month during the fall and spring semesters (September through April) for three years; 3) required courses year-round for three years; 4) considerable online course content; 5) field education activities arranged close to where students live or work, scheduled for Fall and Spring semesters in the second and third years of the program; and 6) mentors in each of the learning communities.

During the annual *Summer Institute*, students from across the state commute to the University's main campus where they stay for one week. During the students' first Summer Institute, the primary focus is on team building within each learning community. Students take part in team building activities, develop a team contract, and undertake several team projects. Although they will have had some online contact through a course they are taking simultaneously, this will be the first time they meet in person. Students also receive training on various online tools that will be used throughout the program, such as Angel (the course management system used), the University's library website, Skype, and various collaboration tools. In conjunction with their first course, which is an introduction to social work practice, a significant portion of the week is also dedicated to course work. Various speakers are lined up to discuss concepts central to the course, and consultants from the university's Writing Center spend a considerable amount of time with students working on graduate level writing. The course proceeds at a fairly slow pace in keeping with recommendations for strategies to avoid cognitive overload (Tyler-Smith, 2006). During the students' second and third Summer Institutes, more of the week is dedicated to course content. Each year, the learning communities revisit team contracts and make any necessary changes. Events are scheduled throughout the week to allow for interaction between cohorts.

The other face-to-face component of the Blended MSW Program consists of *instructional meetings one Saturday each month* during the fall and spring semesters. Learning communities throughout the state

meet at a local college or university that is linked through interactive television (ITV) to instructors on the University's main campus. Each learning community consists of four to six students and a faculty mentor. The exact locations of the regional sites are not determined until after applicants are admitted into the program. In general, locations are selected to minimize the average distance traveled by students in each regional group.

The Blended MSW Program is a three-year part-time 57-credit hour program. In order to complete program requirements within this time frame on a part-time basis, students *take courses year-round*. Most semesters involve either two courses or one course plus field education. *A considerable portion of course work is completed online* through the use of electronic collections of readings, asynchronous discussion forums, synchronous chats, and other assignments.

Field education is the experiential component of the MSW program where students are able to integrate theory with practice. The purpose of field education is to provide supervised opportunities directed toward student development of professional identity, self-understanding, and competent practice. Students in the Blended Program complete four semesters of field education (two semesters in each of two different agencies) during the second and third years of the program. This means students spend sixteen hours per week, or 240 hours for each of four semesters (960 hours total), in human service organizations affiliated with the University and arranged close to where students live or work. These experiences must be supervised by a staff member with an accredited MSW degree and two years of post-master's experience in social work practice.

Each faculty *mentor* works with the same group of students for the duration of the program, fulfilling the four mentor roles as outlined by Evans (2000): role model, tutor, sponsor, and motivator. Mentors in the program are known for their academic and professional excellence (role model), support students in the pursuit of course objectives (tutor), advocate for students as a field liaison (sponsor), and serve as a mediator and source of encouragement within each group (motivator). As is true of many graduate social work programs, many students in the Blended Program are non-traditional. The combination of returning to school and completing coursework online is anxiety-provoking for some. The utilization of mentors "provides the new student with a certain sense of security by reducing the anxiety and apprehension that may occur" (Peyton, Morton, Perkins, & Dougherty, 2001, p. 348). Essentially, mentors play a critical role in humanizing the online environment (Gunawardena et al., 2006).

Recruiting and Preparing Faculty and Mentors

Two of the six faculty members expected to teach in the first year of the program participated in a three-day workshop on Blended Learning offered by the MSU unit that supports online and blended learning efforts of faculty. Subsequent conversations with this unit led to their agreement to provide all technical support needed to work with the faculty in the Blended MSW Program to convert all of the required courses in the program from tradition to blended formats.

The promise of this support made it easier to recruit four additional faculty for the first set of courses for the first cohort. In September, 2005, nine months before the first course scheduled for the first cohort, we began a series of meetings with the staff of this technical support unit to address the issues related to course conversion. After several group meetings, subsequent work was accomplished by individual faculty working alongside individual technical consultants.

During the fall of 2005, the first class of prospective mentors came together to learn about the Blended MSW Program and what the role of mentor might look like. To support this process, members of the FCG created a mini-course on mentoring using the course management system that students and mentors all would be required to learn. The course content included more details about the mentor role, literature related to mentoring, and an 'opportunity' to practice with some of the tools that students would be using like online quizzes and uploading short essays. The mini-course was archived on the course management system for subsequent mentor training and orientation.

Arranging Technology Resources

As noted above, aligning the appropriate technology support services was an absolutely essential part of the planning for the Blended MSW Program. During the year before the public launch of the program, arrangements were made with the following on-campus units for specialized support services:

1) As noted above, support for faculty in instructional design and course conversion to blended formats was to be provided by the unit of the MSU's Libraries, Computing, and Technology (LCT) division that provides technical support for faculty in online and blended learning.

2) An agreement was reached with the LCT unit responsible for interactive video instructional efforts and related video services. This unit would take responsibility for negotiating contracts with all of the regional sites that were needed for the five learning community groups' monthly sessions linked to faculty on campus, as well as for actual interactive video operations on those Saturdays. It was known at the time but this unit eventually took the lead in MSU podcasting efforts and invited our Blended MSW Program faculty to play a role in early podcast productions.

In addition to these specialized arrangements, the FCG engaged in conversations with other units on campus to insure that other services would be available for the new program and its students. Specifically:

3) We were assured that there would be 24/7 technical support available to faculty and students to assist with any issues related to the courses run on the MSU course management system.

4) Conversations with distance learning library staff at MSU identified key staff to assist faculty and students with accessing and utilizing in the course management system library-owned and other resources. They also agreed to provide instruction to students during the Summer Institute on how to access all library resources remotely 24/7.

Student Support Services

Accreditation requirements for MSW programs determine a large part of the coursework in the 57-credit MSW program at MSU. In fact, students only have six credits of electives. This results in very few needs for academic advising during the program. In addition, since all students in a given cohort take all of the same courses at the same time, students know even before they are admitted which courses they will have to take in which semesters for the entire three years. The only academic questions that arise relate to elective options, and these can be addressed to individual faculty or to the Blended MSW Program Coordinator who serves as the official adviser of record for the students.

After the first year, the focus of the program changes considerably to the students' field placements, and during this period the students' mentors generally provide the first level of support for student issues. Given the relative geographic proximity of the mentors and the fact that students meet with their mentors face-to-face at the regional sites once each month, in-person, phone, and online mechanisms for contact are all available. Mentors are backed up by the campus-based Field Coordinator for the program as well as by the Blended MSW Program Coordinator. Most routine questions about schedules, registering for courses, etc. are addressed to staff in the School of Social Work's Graduate Program Office, where the Blended Program is structurally housed.

Marketing and Recruitment

Marketing for the program continues online year round, but there is only one admissions cycle because all applications are due by January 10 for the cohort that begins four months later in mid-May. Because of

the deadline, the heaviest period for marketing is during the fall semester each year. The program uses a mix of tools and strategies in its marketing efforts including

- a program web site with detailed information about the program, video presentations, a Frequently Asked Questions document, and links to application and admissions resources;
- printed brochures and posters which can be distributed by mail and email; printed materials are mailed to human services agencies throughout the state, but over time there has been a transition to distributing documents my email;
- information sessions held in 4-6 locations each year; the sessions include onsite presentations as well as a video link to main campus.

The application process for the Blended MSW Program contains all of the elements of the standard MSW process as well as a few additional components. First, in addition to the standard requirements for admission to any MSW program at MSU, applicants for the Blended Program must:

- live more than 50 miles from BOTH the main and one satellite MSU campus;
- have easy access to high speed Internet service (not dial-up) on a regular basis;
- have at least two years of full-time experience (or equivalent) in the human services during the last five years, generally after completion of your bachelor's degree;
- complete an online assessment and orientation program on how to learn effectively in the online environment;
- participate in a personal interview.

The Online Assessment and Orientation Program (OAOP) was developed to benefit both applicants and the School. Built on the course management system that students will use in the program if admitted, the OAOP permits applicants to get a realistic picture of the types of technology, assignments, and demands on their time to be expected in the program. It provides links to resources where they can self-assess the match between their learning styles and the features of online courses, and it requires applicants to then consider what they have learned and write an essay describing how they see the match between their learning style and the Blended Program's features. This essay provides another useful resource for faculty to consider in review of the applicants' admissions materials.

Throughout the OAOP and other contacts with applicants – from the information sessions to the written materials to the OAOP and the personal interview – applicants are repeatedly told about the high level of expectations in the program and the extensive amount of time commitment involved (8-12 hours per week per course; 16 hours per week for field placement). The objective is to stress this information and to encourage applicants to consider seriously if this is the right program for them at this time. Because students who drop out cannot be replaced with other students once the program begins, we must choose carefully whom to admit to each year's cohort.

Experience to Date

The first cohort was recruited to begin in May, 2006, and they will graduate in May, 2009. Thus far the program has been successful in generating considerable interest each year, and we have received complete applications from more than the 25-28 people we can admit each year. Information about expressions of interest and attendance at information sessions is presented in Table 1.

Table 1: Program Inquiries and Information Session Attendance

Year	Inquiries (Phone / Email)	Information Session Attendees
2005	104	54
2006	166	20
2007	201	51
2008	188	43

It is very interesting to note that the majority of our completed applications each year comes from potential students who neither came to one of the information sessions around the state nor contacted the Blended MSW Program office to ask questions of clarification, request additional information, etc. Given the complexity of the program and the application process, we expected that most applicants would have made some contact with us prior to submitting the documents. Instead, we saw the importance of using the OAOP and the personal interview to repeat the most important details about the program in the OAOP and even to quiz applicants in the OAOP on what they remember/know of the principal features of the program.

Prudent planning requires factoring into the admissions process an expectation that several students may not be able to complete the program, and thus far this strategy has been right on target (see Table 2). As you can see from the data, a few students each year have had to ask for either a deferment or a leave of absence. Our assumptions about the number of potential student losses were very optimistic, but we were convinced that the high level of interpersonal support built into the program would ultimately lower program losses. In our experience, it is the learning communities that offer the kind of support that makes learning possible when "life intrudes." For instance, a number of our students have experienced significant life stressors—severe illness, injuries or deaths of family members. It is their learning communities that give them the emotional support, at a time of crisis, to continue in the program.

Table 2: Student Retention and Deferments

Group	# Admitted	# of Withdrawals	Reason for Withdrawal	# of Postponements	Reason for Postponement	# Active in Program
Cohort 2006	26	2	Personal Issues Family Issues	0		24
Cohort 2007	24	1	Unknown	2	Family Issues Medical Issues	21
Cohort 2008	27	3	Medical Issues Family Issues Time Constraints	2	Medical Issues Financial Issues	22

Note: Postponements refer to what are categorized by the university as either 'deferments' or 'leaves.' A *deferment* is a one-year leave that is given when a student has been accepted into the program but has not taken classes yet. A *leave of absence* is a one-year leave that is given when a student has started taking classes but needs to stop out for a time. Leaves and deferments are given in cases of illness, family issues—really, any legitimate reason the student has for taking time out of studies. **The expectation in all cases is that the student will return to the program at a later date**, generally not to exceed one academic year.

In terms of location, applications have been received from potential students from throughout the state. (Because out-of state tuition is double the in-state rates, we get few applicants from out-of-state, but we do have a few who have been admitted.) As noted above, all applications are reviewed and assessed using a variety of approaches, and the five geographic groupings are arranged after students are admitted. Figure 4 below portrays the locations of the fifteen regional groupings from the first three cohorts of the program. Several locations have students in all three cohorts, thus facilitating local connections across years in the program and even such concrete actions as selling books from one cohort to the next.

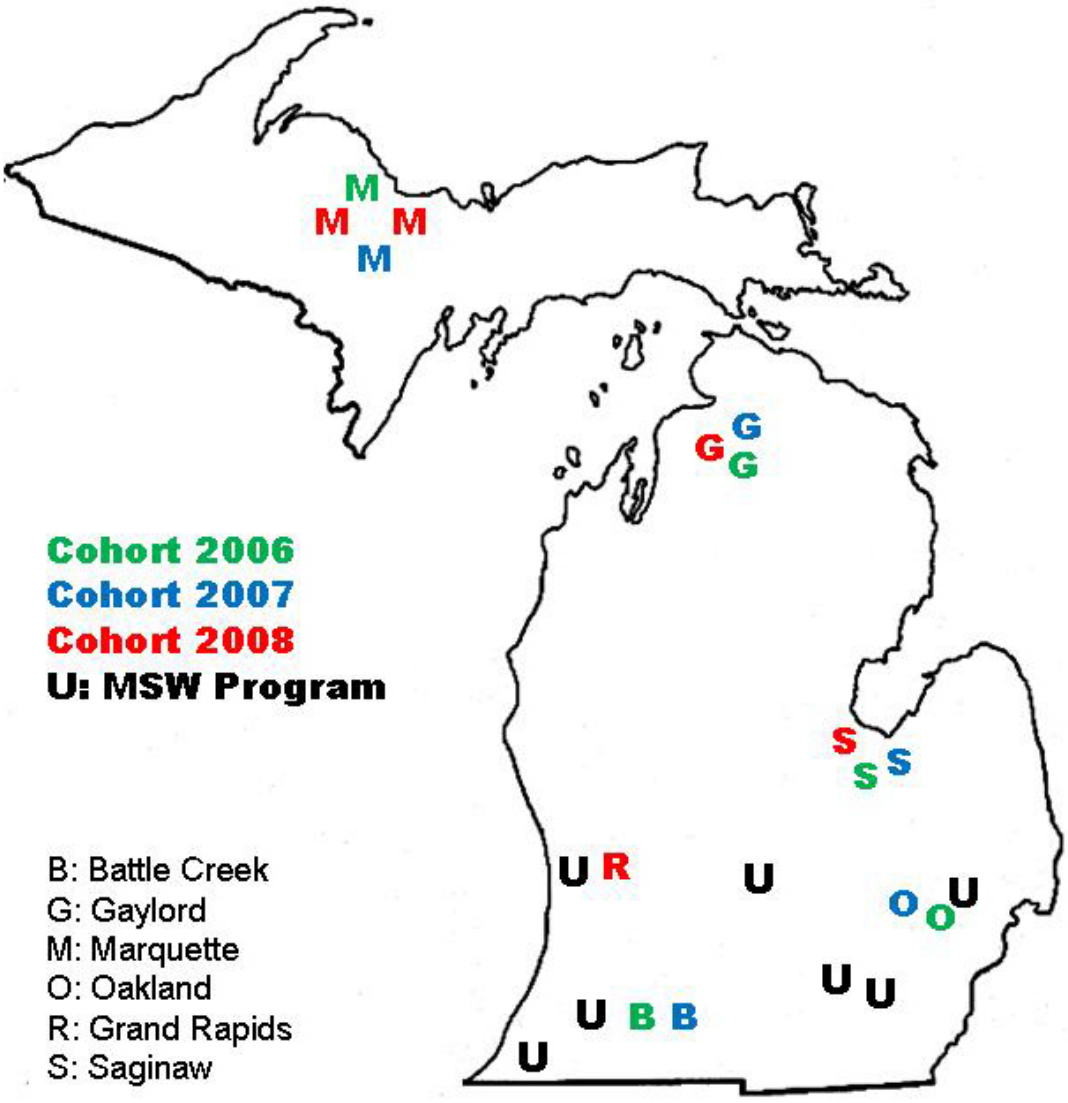

Figure 5: Location of Regional Groups for First 3 Cohorts and all 7 MSW Programs in the State

One way of viewing the program's impact on the access issue is presented in Table 3 below, which shows average distances for students in the five regional groups in each of the first three cohorts from the regional sites, from the MSU campus, and from their nearest MSW program. The data show that some students in the MSU Blended Program are there despite having MSW programs closer to them. What this reflects is the importance of the flexibility created by the blend of technologies. Access is not just about distance.

Table 3: Student Mileage Chart

Location & Legend for Figure 5	Distance to Regional Learning Community Location (in miles)	Distance to Main Campus (in miles)	Distance to Nearest MSW Program (in miles)
Cohort 2006	**58.82**	**131.13**	**161.47**
Battle Creek (B)	68.43	89.79	43.95
Gaylord (G)	63.18	230.53	230.53
Marquette (M)	63.48	160.16	416.71
Oakland (O)	34.67	80.45	24.48
Saginaw (S)	62.03	94.70	91.66
Cohort 2007	**70.80**	**191.27**	**164.63**
Battle Creek (B)	96.64	122.52	63.59
Gaylord (G)	85.92	150.51	141.61
Marquette (M)	66.89	460.66	460.66
Oakland (O)	49.01	102.65	37.29
Saginaw (S)	55.52	120.00	120.00
Cohort 2008	**66.71**	**239.94**	**220.54**
Gaylord (G)	67.39	201.44	194.78
Grand Rapids (R)	83.07	84.89	44.41
Marquette – 1 (M)	68.20	435.89	420.81
Marquette – 2 (M)	38.29	374.58	374.58
Saginaw (S)	76.58	102.92	68.14

Evaluation

The Blended MSW Program is committed to improving the program on a continuing basis, and thus all major features of the program are evaluated regularly. The data collection tools used for this purpose generally include both forced choice scales (to permit comparisons within cohorts over time and across cohorts) and open-ended questions to generate ideas for new features and suggestions for improvement in existing features. The subjects of evaluation efforts include the admissions process, the OAOP, the Summer Institute, all courses, and all field education placements. When a new technology tool is introduced into the system, an evaluation is completed as quickly as possible to aid faculty in deciding whether or not to incorporate the tool.

Comments from students, mentors, and faculty have provided a richly detailed picture of areas of strength and weakness in the program, and the data are summarized, annotated, and circulated among the faculty

and staff on the Blended Program Team for follow-up and action where feasible. Some things – such as issues related to content that is required by the accreditation standards – cannot be changed no matter how many students would prefer not to cover certain subject matter. Other aspects, such as the amount of unstructured time during the Summer Institute to permit more networking, can and have been addressed. Sample comments from students about various aspects of the program demonstrate the nature of the feedback we have received. Here are some student comments related to program components:

Online Assessment and Orientation Program

"Loved it. It really gave me a sense of what the actual program would be like. It was challenging, thought-provoking, and easy to understand."

"I thought it was a great way to get the potential students to see what being in the blended program would be like."

Summer Institute

"Coming to the Institute, I wasn't sure what to expect; however, the entire week has shown me how much the School of Social Work thinks about the students—they really put the students first and go out of their way to make us comfortable every step of the way! Thank you!"

"I really connected well with my group….I didn't think I would. I don't think this would have been possible without the team building."

"It was SO much more structured than I thought it would be. There wasn't as much free time as I thought; but this was good because my regional team REALLY bonded. Overall, it was a great experience and I'm looking forward to next year."

Teams and Mentors

"I believe that our regional group is very cohesive and easy to talk with…it was good to touch base with them again [f2f]."

"I thought my team came together very well as a group. It was nice to have the time in the schedule to work with them and have time to get to know them. I also think having time with our mentors was fantastic!"

"One thing I think should be passed along to future students: blended program are criticized for a lack of establishing bonds and relationships. I was quite active with my undergraduate class and developed many friendships. However, my relationship and bonds that have developed with my graduate classmates are much more significant and closer than my undergraduate classmates (in traditional, f2f setting)."

Plans for future evaluation activities include a set of exit interviews with students and mentors as the first cohort approaches graduation in May, 2009. These will be followed by a similar set of interviews with the students a year after graduation. Another effort will involve working closely with the School of Social Work as it finalizes a set of outcome instruments for measuring all of our MSW programs. Because the educational objectives and outcomes for the Blended MSW Program are the same as those of the on-campus program, we will and must utilize the same set of outcome measures. Finally, in the future we hope to make use of the 'rubrics' defined for online courses in the Sloan-C Quality Matters initiative as a starting point in developing a more complete set of rubrics for the Blended MSW Program (Kane, 2004).

Conclusion

When the FCG began planning the details of the Blended MSW Program, we had a sense that this would be a viable solution to a clearly identifiable need tied directly to issues of access. In order to complete their professional education and raise their skills better to serve their clients, students working in human service agencies throughout the state needed a program with both flexibility and fewer required in-person elements. Human service agencies throughout the state face the dilemma of retaining staff while trying to support their professional development. The accreditation standards in social work education mean that a limited number of MSW programs will be developed, and none of these will likely be entirely online, given the field education requirements. What this combination of factors means is that a blended learning approach which maximizes the best use of a variety of in-person, online, and interactive video components presents a viable answer to the access needs of these students.

Although the program was built upon solid principles, using lessons learned from our own experience and from the literature, there was no guarantee that such a relatively new type of program would find a market niche. During the marketing of the program in the first year we celebrated when we passed the 100 mark in students expressing interest, hoping that this would give us an adequate pool of completed applications. Since then, we have never had to look back. The program is well known in the state and well-established in the life of the School of Social Work. The first cohort will graduate in May, 2009. The concept has become a reality.

How well have we addressed the access issues of our potential students? Here are two fairly typical comments:

"The concept of being able to obtain an MSW while still living in the rural Upper Peninsula makes it especially enticing to me, as time and travel are large deterrents of further education. The hybrid online blended program appears to be a natural step in this technology-based world for both keeping a sense of community through limited face-to-face meetings as well as challenging students with the online atmosphere of greater learning. I welcome and look forward to the opportunity of being a part of this unique learning experience at MSU."

"For the past eight years I have waited for an opportunity such as this. I have thought of going back to college to obtain my Master's Degree in Social Work. With the need to maintain full time employment, raise a family and participate in my children's after school functions, I have left that thought tucked away in the back of my mind…. What excites me most about the Blended Program is that there is an opportunity to take courses and work around "my life"."

The program at MSU is not the only MSW program in the U.S. utilizing a 'blended' approach. An examination of web sites suggests that various combinations of face-to-face, online, interactive video, and other approaches have been combined into programs that can be considered 'blended' at the following universities:

- Valdosta State University (http://www.valdosta.edu/sowk/overview/options/options.shtml)
- Texas State University, San Marcos (http://www.socialwork.txstate.edu/On-Line-Masters-Program.html)
- Metropolitan State College of Denver (http://www.mscd.edu/~socwrk/)
- University of Missouri (http://ssw.missouri.edu/msw.shtml#ocp-rs)
- University of North Dakota (http://www.conted.und.edu/ddp/msw/earn_msw.html)
- University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign (http://www.continuinged.uiuc.edu/oce-sites/outreach/profile_socialwork.cfm)
- University of Hawaii (http://www.hawaii.edu/sswork/de/index.html)

There are no doubt other blended social work programs already operating or in the planning stage. What this wide range of 'blended' programs suggests is that the need for programs – the access issues – can and have been addressed in social work by creating programs using a combination of elements that is seen as working for their target student populations in their unique environments.

The MSU Blended MSW Program will continue to adapt to changing needs of students, faculty and mentors, using continuous feedback to guide the direction of change. Other changes will result from developments in the technology tools available for use in the program. Dede (2005) points to the necessity of looking at continuing developments in technology and how it is used, with as yet unanswerable questions about what new learning styles may emerge from the use of this new technology. The Blended MSW Program will no doubt look different in a few years, but this is one of the advantages of a blended learning approach – adaptations can be made relatively easily to make the program better.

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