Massive Open Online Courses (MOOCs) in Social Work Education: Implications for Online Education

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Abstract: *Rapid technological developments continue to create new opportunities for innovation in higher education. Social work education (SWE) has often lagged behind other disciplines in applying emergent trends. The historical influence of social work professionalization may contribute to this cautious approach. Massive open online courses (MOOCs) are an important trend gathering recent attention in higher education. The contribution of MOOCs to SWE remains undetermined. This essay explores the relevance of MOOCs for SWE through the lens of historical context considering economic factors, benefits, and challenges to MOOC implementation. We conclude with recommendations for integrating MOOCs in SWE.*

Keywords: *Social work education, online education, massive open online courses, open enrollment, educational technology, access to education*

Higher education (HE) continues to adapt to a changing economy, expanding technology, and fluctuating student bodies. Social work education (SWE) has become increasingly complex as such factors converge with pressures for educational change. Massive open online courses (MOOCs) are a recent development sweeping through online HE in expanding application to diverse disciplines of study (Head, 2014; Pence, 2012). Determining the relevance of MOOCs for SWE requires weighing the specialized professional requirements of social work with the benefits and challenges of the MOOC educational format. In this essay, we provide an overview of MOOCs, review historical influences on SWE, and consider factors surrounding MOOC utilization for SWE. Lastly, we provide recommendations for a deliberative strategy to include MOOCs in SWE.

Overview of MOOCs

MOOCs have rapidly advanced from their first inception. MOOCs began in 2008 with a course opened to online enrollment by Siemens and Downes at the University of Manitoba (Brown, 2013). The Massachusetts Institute of Technology and Stanford University followed with free online courses in technical fields (Sandeen, 2013). Educators proposed MOOCs as free college-level courses that would provide instruction to any student with an Internet connection, perhaps reaching thousands of students per course (Bowen, 2013). In 2011, 160,000 students enrolled in Stanford's artificial intelligence MOOC, grounding the vision (Rodriguez, 2012).

MOOCs are a specialized form of online education (OE). They are *massive* for enrollment numbers that dwarf comparison to traditional courses (Tschofen & Mackness, 2012). They are *open* both for access to courses and for a learning environment emphasizing flexible interaction between participants and content resources (Rodriguez,

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2012; Tschofen & Mackness, 2012). MOOCs are *free* to the enrolled, but do incur costs requiring subsidy decisions by sponsors (Cusumano, 2013; Vardi, 2012). The paradox of MOOCs is that there are many variations and practical interpretations for *massive*, *open*, and *free* implementation (Baggaley, 2013; Clark, 2013; Miller, 2014; Tschofen & Mackness, 2012). MOOCs range from models of informal participation to formal recognition of completion through certificates and college credit (Cooper & Sahmi, 2013; Cusumano, 2013). The attraction to MOOCs may be tied to a pedagogy that embraces elements of learner self-organization, connectedness, openness, complexity, and a chaotic learning environment reliant on individualized participant applications (Brown, 2013; deWaard et al., 2011; Saadatmand & Kumpulainen, 2014).

The phenomenal growth of MOOCs has astounded many in HE. Currently, MOOC giant Coursera (2013) offers 550 courses from 107 institutions throughout the world, in diverse subjects including education, science, sociology, law, and public health. A growing number of Coursera's courses are available for college credit. To date, however, social work courses on MOOC platforms are limited and only in beginning stages of development.

Historical Tensions in SWE in the U.S.

Historical influences in SWE may be partly responsible for the discipline's notable absence in MOOCs. Professionalization was one of the first controversies surrounding SWE and stemmed from two distinct approaches to practice. Addams organized settlement houses at Hull House in Chicago, advocating for participatory engagement from middle-class volunteers to serve the poor (Lundblad, 1995). Richmond of the Charity Organization Society conceptualized social work differently. She saw the potential for casework as a systematic method for managing individual and family problems (Kemp, Whittaker, & Tracy, 1997; Morris, 2000; Wenocur & Reisch, 2001). Settlement houses focused on broad societal-level goals while casework targeted individualized interventions. Time would eventually integrate these aims. Social work grew to incorporate individual, family, group, and community work (Margolin, 1997).

Practice competency has also driven the nature of SWE. Early SWE occurred within community agencies using the casework-focused approach of Richmond's model (Wenocur & Reisch, 2001). Though a consensus on whether SWE should remain in agencies or move to the university was hardly reached, in 1898 the first social work class was offered at the New York School of Philanthropy (later Columbia University) (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2013). This event began the convention, continued through the 1960s, of SWE as an MSW-level university degree (NASW, 1995).

SWE expanded further in the 1970s with Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) education. BSW programs developed from a need to professionalize entry-level workers. In 1974, the first BSW programs emerged (Reid & Edwards, 2006). Controversy ensued regarding elements of undergraduate SWE and its distinction from MSW programs; today, boundaries of BSW and MSW programs continue to generate discussion (Aguilar, Brown, & Cowan, 1997; Raymond & Atherton, 1991; Vinton, 1999; Weinbach, 1999; Wolk & Wertheimer, 1999;).

OE and Practice

OE is one aspect of HE affecting SWE (Menon & Coe, 2000). Online enrollments are growing at rates faster than traditional HE enrollment. For the first time in years, HE enrollments dropped in number while online enrollment sustained a 9.3% growth rate (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Approximately 6.7 million students nationwide, or one third of HE students, are enrolled online (Allen & Seaman, 2013). HE institutions increasingly value OE. In the last decade, the percentage of educational administrators considering OE as a long-term strategy and acknowledging the institutional importance of online education has grown from a minority to nearly 70% (Allen & Seaman, 2013). OE owes its success to economic advantages, a growing numbers of tech-savvy students, measurable outcomes, emerging technology, and educational innovation (Miller, 2014). Perceived advantages to OE extend to SWE.

Early discussions about OE in HE concerned the efficacy of online instruction compared with traditional face-to-face formats. The bulk of research over several decades has found no significant differences in learning outcomes between online and traditional educational methodologies (Bowen, 2013; Neuhauser, 2002). In fact, some research points to small or moderate advantage to OE using objective measures of student outcomes (Miller, 2014). OE research confirms similar equivalency between distance and traditional course outcomes (Banks & Faul, 2007; Beaulaurier, 2005; Cummings, Foels, & Chaffin, 2013; Haga & Heitkamp, 2000; Pardasani, Goldkind, Heyman, & Cross-Denny, 2012). Evidence supporting OE has moved debate from questioning OE to exploring its accepted role (Gillingham, 2009).

The incorporation of OE into SWE has evolved unevenly through cautious experimentation. OE in SWE has taken different forms as technology improves and comfort zones expand. Beginning efforts used OE as peripheral supplements to face-to-face instruction in blended learning models. SWE has used online methodologies including wikis (Allwardt, 2011), WebCT (Aguirre & Mitschke, 2011), videoconferencing (Berger, Stein, & Mullin, 2009), discussion forums (Bye, Smith, & Rallis, 2009), and social media (Kilpeläinen, Päykkönen, & Sankala, 2011). These instructional strategies led to increasing engagement of social work in OE.

Researchers have consistently verified the success of OE in SWE. Social workers demonstrate technological skills and comfort with technology (Dedman & Palmer, 2011; Hash & Tower, 2010; Levine & Chapparro, 2007; Webber, Currin, Groves, Hay, & Fernando, 2010). Social workers use technology to communicate with clients, engage in consultation, identify community resources for the purpose of referrals, research best practices, engage in community building, and a host of other purposes (NASW, 2005). These findings indicate outcomes for OE spanning technological proficiency, communication demonstrations, research applications, and resource coordination. Additionally, clients use the internet to research social work services, participate in self-help groups, develop social networks, and learn more about presenting needs (Finn, 1999; Perron, Taylor, Glass, & Margerum-Leys, 2010; Waldman & Rafferty, 2008). Such developments in online activity have led to greater incorporation of OE in SWE.

Accreditation

Accreditation has been a natural outgrowth of OE in SWE. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) is the SWE accreditation body in the U.S. CSWE (2015) has accredited at least seven BSW programs using distance education in various forms. Additions to the list of accredited online MSW programs continue to rise; 35 are currently identified by CSWE (2015). CSWE uses the same criteria for accrediting traditional, blended, and OE. Clearly, OE is gaining increasing acceptance.

Broadening OE in SWE brings associated benefits. Blackmon (2013) noted greater online accessibility for nontraditional students and advocated that SWE stay technologically current to remain viable. The accessibility of OE has opened doors in HE for nontraditional students. OE shows higher rates of minority, non-traditional, and graduate students (U.S. Department of Education, 2011). Some describe this phenomenon as empowering (Horwath & Shardlow, 2000) but others critique OE as diluted and mass-produced (Collins, 2008).

Field Education

Even those lauding OE's potential acknowledge challenges. Field education presents one dilemma for the development of OE, including MOOCs. Field education provides socialization into the profession as well as the development of knowledge, skills, and appropriate professional judgment (Earls Larrison & Korr, 2013). Field education is the "signature pedagogy" of SWE that integrates classroom theory and community practice (CSWE, 2013). SWE's slow adaptation to technology may stem from the importance of human connection (Dalton, 2001; Siebert & Spaulding-Givens, 2006; Simpson, Williams, & Segall, 2007). Critics fear that interpersonal communication is lost in OE (Haga & Heitkamp, 2000). Other perspectives support the ability for positive online interaction, admittedly through strategies that differ from face-to-face methods (Brown, 2013; deWaard et al., 2011).

The growth of OE in SWE has produced research on the intersection of fieldwork and technology. Researchers found field instructors favorable to Internet tools (Berg-Weger, Rochman, Rosenthal, Sporleder, & Birkenmaier, 2007; Dedman & Palmer, 2011). Likewise, Hash and Tower (2010) confirmed that most social work students do not encounter technological barriers to OE. Research investigating OE and development of practice skills has revealed significant findings. The benefits of OE include collaborative learning, peer support, and technological skill development (Jones, 2010; Kilpeläinen et al., 2011).

Tuite and McLlean (2013) found online support critical for alleviating isolation with students in field. Online practice courses have provided feedback and practicum supervision to students accompanied by improved student skills (Coe & Elliot, 1999; Coe & Youn, 2008; Rautenbach & Black-Hughes, 2012; Siebert & Spaulding-Givens, 2006; Zeman & Swanke, 2008). Online instruction may diversify teaching through global interaction, increasing cultural awareness (Carter-Anand & Clarke, 2009; Rautenbach & Black-Hughes, 2012). Findings of negative student reactions to OE are sparse. Allwardt (2011) is an exception that described BSW student complaints on wiki use including

reluctance for the method, time-management concerns, and group collaboration difficulties. The bulk of research demonstrates the successful integration of fieldwork with OE. Evidence shows that OE presents several advantages compared to face-to-face methodologies, including increased collaboration, globalized exposure, and accessibility.

The MOOC format shares similarity to many features in established OE. Connectivist MOOCs (c-MOOCs) are a type of MOOC using participant input to drive course direction. The hallmarks of c-MOOCs are autonomy, diversity, openness, and interactivity (Rodriguez, 2012; Tschofen & Mackness, 2012). These characteristics relate directly to aspects of online instruction that support field work and practice skill development.

Economic Concerns in HE

Complementing curricular advantages in OE are financial benefits. HE is in a financial crisis. The costs of maintaining a campus have skyrocketed while funding has decreased (McGuinness, 2011). The State University of New York, for instance, lost $700 million in state support over a 4-year period (Smith, 2013). Students bear the brunt of skyrocketing costs. Tuition increases continue with tuition charges exceeding actual costs for institutions (Bowen, 2013). Many students graduate with educational debt. The Institute for College Access and Success (2012) estimated that 66% of 2011 graduates have about $26,600 of debt. Debt can negatively affect social workers, who are often paid low starting salaries (NASW, 2006).

Educators and policymakers seek alternative methods of course delivery to enable institutions to remain operable and contain student costs. Understanding cost factors in educational delivery is complex, and there is no definitive answer for OE implementation costs. Some critics point to increased costs associated with OE (Miller, 2014). In contrast, some universities consider OE a way to offset budget cuts (Mildenberg, 2013). Stakeholders in HE, including social welfare educators, are looking to OE models to address financial strains. MOOCs are a recent development in consideration for meeting such HE goals. The role of MOOCs in HE remains unclear, but the potential for MOOCs to teach large numbers of participants and increase social work conceptual mastery warrants attention.

MOOCs are an emergent HE development. The interest in MOOCs has engendered excitement and speculation in HE. Reactions have ranged from indifference to projections that MOOCs will forever change the market. Baggaley (2013) captured this uncertainty:

> In the years to come, the MOOC may be hailed as an educational redeemer, or as an ugly symptom of the general educational slide. If [the MOOC] is ultimately disgraced, will the universities and colleges of the world pass the buck... [or if] it is a triumph, will fingers be pointed at the early MOOC enthusiasts for another reason—for pulling the rug from under the feet of the original [OE] institutions, and destroying their market? (p. 374)

Institutional participation in MOOCs is limited. Currently, less than 3% of HE institutions offer a MOOC, less than 10% are planning a MOOC, and 33% do not plan to participate in MOOCs (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Over 50% of institutions remain undecided

regarding MOOC participation (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Institutional caution toward developing trends is not unique to MOOCs. Despite the success of OE over two decades of instruction, some faculty continue to question it (Miller, 2014). Reliance on any one measure of MOOC evaluation is flawed. Honest evaluation of potential MOOC contribution requires comprehensive assessment of the benefits, challenges, and relevance to SWE.

MOOC Benefits

MOOCs present many advantages which draw attention to their future promise. MOOCs provide a range of synchronous and asynchronous interaction for adult learners seeking scheduling flexibility from educational institutions. Adult learners expect that educational programs fit the demands of their busy lives and desire increased options in education. Individualized learning is another related advantage. Within a single course, MOOCs typically offer a variety of resources and learning methods that students may select for strength-based application (Skiba, 2012). Social engagement, self-direction, and collaborative learning are MOOC traits that attract learners though greater self-selection than traditional courses (deWaard et al., 2011; Skiba, 2012). MOOC participation may also generate student interest for traditional courses (Cerf, 2013), as 75% of students taking a free online course later enrolled in an additional course (Foster, 2013). Curiously, students have not pursued offers of low-cost transfer credit for MOOC courses (Kolowich, 2013). Many current MOOC students are professionals who already hold degrees,83 and course credit may not be as valuable to these students (Kolowich, 2013).

HE institutions have found benefits from MOOC participation. The massive enrollments in MOOC courses provide advantages over traditional OE. MOOCs generate enormous amounts of data on student participation and interaction. This characteristic allows unique research application to the MOOC classroom and makes MOOCs a natural testing ground for online pedagogy (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Educators may assess experimental or pedagogical interventions with large numbers of students in the time-efficient run of a single course (Cooper & Sahami, 2013). Institutions have also used new instructional models incorporating MOOCs. “Flipped classrooms” require students to access MOOC content prior to class lectures, increasing subject familiarity (Cooper & Sahami, 2013, p. 30). This practice saves time and allows in-class instruction to focus on priority needs. MOOCs also offer the possibility of cost reduction for both institutions and students. The ability to generate courses shared across institutions through collaborative delivery aids educational institutions while free access directly benefits students.

The role of MOOCs in social justice is relevant to the mission of social workers. Each MOOC has the potential for reaching hundreds of thousands of students globally. Any person with an Internet connection could access SWE via a MOOC. MOOCs are a suggested solution to disparities preventing access to high quality education in many areas of the world (Hyman, 2012). Expanding access to SWE via MOOCs could help ensure that those involved in social welfare and social justice throughout the world have a baseline SWE. This could have significant impact for social justice workers in developing or underdeveloped economies. Planned funding structures could ensure economically advantaged constituencies offset the costs of MOOCs to ensure free content for the

financially disadvantaged. This is an opportunity for SWE in developed nations to fulfill a social justice mission. Social justice and other MOOC benefits offset challenges acknowledged in the emerging instructional format.

MOOC Challenges

MOOC development is not without its skeptics. The harshest MOOC critics describe the MOOC learning process as mass communication that has abandoned educational principles in a simplistic, impersonal, and potentially disorganized manner (Baggaley, 2013). Low retention rates may confirm difficulties in the MOOC learning environment. Tens of thousands of students often enroll in a single MOOC, but less than 10% of students actually complete courses (Calderwood, 2013; Daniel, 2012). Universities weighing course completion, graduation rates, and federal student loan requirements must seriously consider such consequences. Additionally, MOOCs may cater to more advanced or informal learners with abilities to navigate the self-directed learning inherent in MOOC design (Calderwood, 2013; Fini, 2009; Rodriguez, 2012).

MOOC critics also challenge the assumptions of accessibility and the promises of democratic idealism achieved through global participation in MOOCs. Hopes for broad international participation may be tempered by findings that demonstrate an overwhelming rate of participation by developed nations (Rodriguez, 2012). Likewise, Rhoads, Berdan, and Toven-Lindsey (2013) provided provocative discussion highlighting the role of power through information management of MOOC content. These authors cautioned that MOOCs could easily become a tool fostering increasing reliance of undeveloped nations on developed nations' cultural imperatives (Rhoads, et al., 2013). Others have agreed that MOOCs have detrimental potential to advance elitist forms of knowledge control (Portmess, 2013). As the wealthiest nations enter the MOOC market, subversion of undeveloped national perspectives could be an unintentional consequence.

MOOCs face a number of inherent difficulties. Technical problems, such as the ones that forced Georgia Tech to abort a MOOC course, intensify with massive enrollments (Kolowich, 2013). Evaluation of student work in MOOCs also poses difficulties. Universities may struggle to verify student identity (Hyman, 2012) or eliminate plagiarism (Cooper & Sahami, 2013). Some disciplines, like social work, use subjective assessments that make MOOC grading difficult. For example, it is difficult to quantify practice skills or subjective judgment.

The financial viability of MOOCs is a primary concern, even for enthusiasts of the technology. A single course may require 100 hours to develop, cost upwards of $50,000, and need 10 hours of management per week while running (Foster, 2013; Kolowich, 2013). Massive enrollments are a perceived value of MOOCs, but free participation presents a quandary. Educators have not agreed on ways to capitalize such interest into monetary gains (Cusumano, 2013; Dellarocas & Van Alstyne, 2013; Hyman, 2012).

In addition, educators have found a range of philosophical problems with MOOCs. Despite the financial uncertainties of MOOCs, the potential for economic gain from mass enrollments has prompted some analysts to suggest that monetary gain has trumped educational quality (Aguaded-Gómez, 2013; Vardi, 2012). Educators cite additional

philosophical objections to MOOCs, such as a perception that MOOCs discourage critical thinking and stifle engaged learning (Kolowich, 2013) despite online potential to improve these educational goals (Miller, 2014). Even more, there are concerns that free HE devalues education (Cusumano, 2013). Finally, MOOCs might become so popular that smaller colleges, unable to compete, would be shouldered out of the educational market, leading to large-scale educational monopolies (Cusumano, 2013; Kolowich, 2013). These concerns temper enthusiasm for MOOC participation.

MOOCs in Social Work

The long-term success of MOOCs remains unknown. The potential of MOOCs and their current influence on HE necessitates objective evaluation by the social work profession regarding potential MOOC participation. Collaboration and a variety of instructional methods provide options to tailor student learning, while the low cost of MOOCs offers low-risk opportunities for students to explore interests. Institutional advantages occur in pedagogical assessment, supplemental resources, and cost savings. Standardized courses and global access support social justice goals pertinent to SWE. These benefits have earned MOOCs significant attention in HE. Still, challenges remain.

Objections to MOOC participation include philosophical and concrete arguments. MOOC instruction may circumvent critical thinking with a reliance on simplistic student evaluation. Elitism may be an inadvertent result of top-down instruction that marginalizes underdeveloped nations' cultural perspectives. Low retention rates and specialized learning modalities may limit full participation to a less ambitious enrollment pool than initially projected. Lastly, MOOC financial sustainability remains a valid concern along with apprehension toward market saturation. Assessment of MOOCs for SWE requires understanding the complexity of MOOCs.

It is clear that MOOCs are evolving in methodology and application. The potential of MOOCs to advance SWE remains untested and without significant discipline contribution in this emergent format. Recognition of MOOC challenges is generating proposed solutions, and some educators regard MOOCs in SWE as a positive trend (Kurzman, 2013). Further, SWE is beginning to venture into MOOC development. For example, "The Social Context of Mental Health and Illness" is a MOOC course offered through Coursera ("MOOC List," 2014). It connects conceptions of mental illness to CSWE core competencies addressing diversity, human rights, and policy (CSWE, 2008).

Other possibilities exist for MOOCs in SWE. Using MOOCs, students enrolled in an introductory course at multiple institutions might participate in a single MOOC offered by one institution. Educators could offer a required foundation course (e.g., HBSE) to students in all accredited social work programs. Theoretical courses, like HBSE, lend themselves to MOOC adaptation and, ultimately, the standardization of a knowledge base among many social work students. MOOCs will force stakeholders in SWE to re-think volume. Why are 20, 30, or 100 students in a course section superior to 10,000 students (or 100,000 for that matter)? Can an online-mediated course with such large enrollments deliver content as effectively as other online options or face-to-face encounters?

Discussion and Recommendations

Certainly, questions on MOOC use in SWE will continue, but this dialogue is an important contribution to development. HE is in flux, and SWE must adapt. University budgets are being drastically slashed, and academic departments are required to serve more students with fewer resources. This reality is likely to continue. SWE must adapt its educational offerings in order to survive, as well as to ensure that students are learning the skills needed for practice.

SWE have been slow to warm to OE. Historical tensions have contributed to polarities in SWE that cast influence on current trends. Early controversies included conflicts between macro and micro practice, disputes over professionalization, and the disagreement over community or university settings for SWE. Today, SWE is cautiously approaching greater acceptance of OE methods as research supports OE efficacy. Methods to support fieldwork and skill development have proven possible for OE. Technological development has introduced new methods for educating social workers, enhancing practice, and continuing practice development that SWE needs to evaluate.

The reluctance of SWE to embrace OE has meant that social work has not participated in the development of new OE technology like MOOCs. SWE is at disadvantage without participation in emerging OE. MOOCs have potential to contribute positively to HE, and it is likely that MOOCs will have significant impact in HE in the next decade. SWE has not adequately assessed how MOOCS can help alleviate diminished institutional resources.

Failing to adapt MOOCs and other OE technologies would be a loss for SWE. One of these losses will be in the arena of attracting students. Students come to the classroom expecting to use emerging technology, including OE technologies. Some students have this expectation because they use technology in every area of their lives, while others may want to be engaged with technology because they lead complex lives. MOOCs help these students fit their education around their lives. If SWE does not adapt, student enrollments may suffer.

There are also losses within the area of state and other institutional funding. Public institutions of higher learning are being forced to do more with less. Serving more students to meet the bottom line is a reality. MOOCs, while free to varying degrees, do have development and maintenance costs. Most successful MOOCs have a course instructor, a team of teaching assistants, and technical support professionals, but these costs could be spread across multiple institutions. One solution would be for institutions to share a portion of the instructor cost per each enrolled student. For example, an institution enrolling 100 students would pay a greater portion of the instructor costs than an institution enrolling 50 students. However, there may be a potential long-term cost savings. While such an arrangement would mean that individual faculty members give up a degree of control over content delivery, such an arrangement could help ensure students receive a consistent knowledge base. The disadvantages of standardization may be offset by better public protection when states have greater certainty of consistent learning within shared MOOCs.

Recommendations

There are sound reasons for SWE to use the MOOC platform. Some educators are already engaging in the discussion on MOOC emergence, but the implementation of MOOCs in SWE has not yet transpired. SWE has much to lose by failing to embrace MOOCs. SWE is already behind the curve. Below are recommendations for how faculty and other stakeholders can more actively get involved in MOOC development:

(1) *Identify funding initiatives that would support the development of social work MOOCs.* Like other OE, MOOCs require significant resources. Faculty cannot develop MOOCs without significant investment from their universities and other funding organizations. Like other OE, developing MOOCs requires substantive expertise as well as technology support (Schoech, 2000). Faculty should be supported in the development of MOOCs through financial incentives (e.g., course releases or other grant support) and technical support. MOOC development is not likely if faculty are expected to maintain typical teaching loads and to rely upon the university helpdesk for support.

(2) *Further assess MOOC course development needs in collaboration with other colleges/universities*. The scope of MOOCs requires additional resources and planning beyond a traditional online format to accommodate extremely large enrollments. As MOOCs require significant substantive and technical expertise, administrators should pursue collaborations among colleges and universities. Collaborations allow institutions to gain the benefits of MOOCs while sharing costs to provide them. Institutional MOOC benefits extend beyond advantages for tuition-paying students to preparing large numbers of at-risk students to succeed and providing free course content to promote interest in a field to the general population. Departments and schools of social work should first begin conversations about what practice, policy, and/or research courses could potentially be developed together as a MOOC. For example, educators could share a human behavior or policy course among 10 or more institutions. Under the current model, classes of 20 or 30 are often taught within the same geographic region (and often by the same contingent instructor). This is significant duplication of effort. The CSWE or another stakeholder could spearhead an effort to share development and delivery costs among institutions.

(3) *Inform other social work educators about the benefits of MOOCs.* Much of the resistance to MOOCs may be stemming from fear about what faculty members have to lose by adopting MOOCs. The faculty may worry that MOOCs will make their jobs obsolete or that MOOCS will result in “farming out” SWE positions to contingent faculty. These are real concerns. Yet, to some degree, this is already happening. Faculty members can best maintain their place in SWE by adapting to new roles. There will always be need for faculty members to supervise students in field, as this can never be fully replicated online.

(4) *Consider the diversity that MOOCs bring to SWE.* A MOOC that is shared across universities, across rural and urban contexts, and across global

boundaries has considerable advantage for students. Imagine a diversity course shared between a university in rural Alabama, Chicago, San Francisco, and Bangkok. Students and faculty alike would benefit from the diverse perspectives that such arrangements would afford. This would yield an experiential education component that would be difficult to replicate even in field placement. Sharing MOOCs across borders would expose students to meaningful and lasting relationships that might spur a growth of interest in international social work. It might be a way of providing globalized content to students who would not otherwise seek out global opportunities.

(5) *Determine the role of MOOCs' social work educational provision through practical strategies.* There are multiple possibilities for practical application of the MOOC course format to SWE. Current students and participants from across the globe are sources for potential large MOOC enrollments. Certainly, challenges in financial sustainability, student self-directed learning capabilities, and practice skill considerations affect MOOC implementation in social work. Tailoring MOOCs to specific course content addresses several of these issues. Policy, HBSE, and elective courses may prove more appropriate than teaching practice skills, although future developments do not preclude MOOC fieldwork contributions. MOOCs may be most appropriate for either advanced learners or novice learners with additional supports to facilitate navigating the MOOC environment. CSWE guidelines for recognizing a social work student, implicit curriculum, and credit for MOOC coursework remain future determinations. SWE is likely to benefit most from an integrated approach to MOOCs alongside online and face-to-face educational options.

(6) *Conduct empirical research on the effectiveness of MOOCs and other emerging learning technologies.* The contribution of SWE to MOOC content requires simultaneous evaluation efforts. Some of the reluctance to MOOCs may be questions about effectiveness. SWE should be at the forefront of empirically testing whether MOOCs have similar (or better) learning outcomes, including course grades and practice skills. SWE should also examine student and faculty satisfaction with this new technology. MOOCs can offer better scheduling options for adult learners and will likely result in increased student satisfaction. Faculty members may also experience increased satisfaction through the larger impact of reaching thousands, instead of hundreds, of students.

Summary

MOOCs represent an important emerging trend in HE. Long-standing tensions in SWE have complicated social work's participation in the emergent MOOC process. The training and education of social workers involves specialized knowledge and practice affecting educational methodologies. Assessment of MOOC capabilities provides evidence that social work participation in MOOCs is likely to have positive impact. MOOCs appear to be an important solution to address economic and adult learning expectations in the coming decade. The time is right for SWE to begin engaging in MOOC development and to

continue actively pursuing OE.

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