

The Role of Residencies in Promoting Student Engagement in Online Pedagogy

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Abstract: *The COVID-19 pandemic has fractured social connections across all industries, including higher education. Some social work departments were forced to shift from traditional on-ground learning to adopt virtual delivery methods, while others voluntarily made this shift to join the emerging online education trends. When the pandemic restrictions abate, online programs may seek to promote social connections through targeted activities such as adopting a grounded residency. Online programs in social work and other fields have varied application in using residencies to bridge the online and on-ground modalities for learning. Students often report asynchronous online platforms foster a reduced sense of engagement in learning and low levels of connected engagement with faculty and peers. In social work programs, these residencies build on explicit and implicit curricular aims and have an argued externality of building engagement. This paper explores data collected from students (n=131) in a master's in social work program before the initiation of pandemic social distancing protocols and their perceptions of engagement related to their grounded residency experience in one online social work program in the southeastern United States. Results of survey data (quantitative and qualitative) are presented and analyzed with a discussion of the relative impact residency efforts may have on students' reported levels of engagement and opportunities to increase social connection in a post-pandemic environment.*

Keywords: *Social work, grounded residency, online education, student engagement, social connection*

Over the last two decades, higher education has shifted learning offerings to multiple platforms. Research has examined learning outcomes, community, and engagement in online platforms versus grounded counterparts. Various studies have demonstrated online platforms' ability to provide similar learning goals and outcomes to traditional delivery methods (Rovai, 2002; Thompson & YuKu, 2006). Furthermore, the research has highlighted the benefits of technological advancements with learning online. Lastly, online learning platforms during the pandemic have allowed many students to continue their education. With the learning platform's shift, examining student engagement and pedagogical strategies becomes paramount for educators in every discipline.

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Literature Review

Implicit Curriculum and Social Work Accreditation

Social work education utilizes a competency-based framework to assess student learning outcomes (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2015). As a result, social work programs must evaluate their explicit and implicit curriculum for accreditation purposes. The explicit curriculum pertains to the "formal educational structure" (p. 11), including coursework and field education. The implicit curriculum is related to the "learning environment" (p. 14) or the context where students encounter the explicit curriculum. This context includes diversity, policies, procedures, resources, administrative structure, advising, and governance (CSWE, 2015). Accreditation standards provide clear expectations for measuring explicit curriculum; however, there has been little guidance on measuring and operationalizing the implicit curriculum of social work programs (Bogo & Wayne, 2013).

Understanding Implicit Curriculum

In recent years, increased attention has been invested in exploring the implicit curriculum of social work programs. The implicit curriculum is described as a "culture of human exchange" (CSWE, 2015, p. 14), which Bogo and Wayne (2013) suggested must be reinforced throughout every student interaction within an educational program. They further assert that the entire educational experience in a program, which extends beyond the classroom and field, socializes students to the profession. Miller (2013) further suggested that the implicit and explicit curricula impact social work students' professional socialization to social work. The student's experience in education programs serves as a "bridge" (p. 384) between the formal education structure (explicit curriculum) and the learning environment (implicit curriculum), which prepares students for the profession. Grady and colleagues (2020) provided an excellent review of the existing literature surrounding implicit curriculum and social work education.

Grady et al. (2011) identified six domains of implicit curriculum to include community, diversity, faculty advising, support services, field, and academic experiences. The authors note field and academics are primarily considered explicit curriculum, with experiences in these settings contributing to a student's learning environment. In their pilot study utilizing a mixed-methods approach, 64 graduating MSW students were surveyed to measure each domain's positive and negative aspects. Results suggested that each of the six domains contributed to the student learning environment and student engagement. The Implicit Curriculum Survey (ICS) was further tested and validated through a multi-program study involving four accredited MSW programs and further confirmed the impact of the implicit curriculum on the student experience (Grady et al., 2018). In this study, two cohorts of graduating MSW students (n=262) identified positive and negative aspects of each domain. In addition to validating the psychometric properties of the ICS, it provided the first validated instrument for measuring the implicit curriculum. Qualitative responses from this multi-program study were further analyzed in a 2020 study to understand student perspectives on the implicit curriculum (Grady et al., 2020). Overall, students reported

positive and challenging aspects of each domain, providing insight on ways programs can attend to the implicit curriculum to improve the student experience.

More specifically, students identified faculty support and presence, interactions with peers, and opportunities to engage with faculty outside the classroom as factors that strongly influenced their experience. Students also reported additional challenges such as fatigue, limited time, and lack of quality supervision which served as distractors during their time in the program, further identifying ways to improve learning outcomes. Although the findings of this study were limited to MSW students in traditional brick-and-mortar on-ground programs, it provides insight into the impact that specific aspects of the implicit curriculum can have on the learning environment. Student responses reflected mixed results about the impact implicit curriculum had on program selection. For example, some students reported location was the primary determining factor for which social work program they applied to; however, several students acknowledged aspects of the implicit curriculum that influenced their decision to enroll in a program.

Peterson and colleagues (2014) utilized an empowerment framework to conceptualize how experience with aspects of the implicit curriculum contributes to professional empowerment. Using a pilot survey administered to 423 MSW students, their study evaluated the impact of the implicit curriculum on professional empowerment. Four measures of implicit curriculum were used, which included diversity of faculty and staff, supportive faculty, opportunity role structure (involvement with the decision-making process and extracurricular activities), and access to information. Findings from this study showed opportunity role structure, meaning student involvement with decision-making processes and extracurricular activities, and access to information directly impacted empowerment and a sense of community. These studies have contributed to operationalizing and measuring the implicit curriculum; however, all have been conducted with on-ground programs. The measurement of implicit curriculum may differ depending upon modality – face-to-face compared to online or hybrid (Grady et al., 2018).

Implicit Curriculum in Online Programs

Due to the increased use of digital technologies in social work education, Quinn and Barth (2014) examined implicit curriculum for blended and online social work programs. In their MSW distance education programs study, the implicit curriculum was operationalized as diversity, student development, faculty, administrative structure, and resources. Sixteen MSW programs responded to a cross-sectional survey and provided examples of how they attend to the various aspects of the implicit curriculum. Findings from this survey suggest that while there is an increase in the use of digital technologies in social work education, many schools continue to utilize traditional methods of communication to engage with distance education students.

Additionally, while many programs utilized a blended approach to instruction, most included some face-to-face components that required faculty and/or students to travel. Although Quinn and Barth (2014) did not provide insight into measuring implicit curriculum in distance education programs, they identified unique opportunities to contribute to the implicit curriculum. For example, digital technologies were reported to

create a more diverse student body with more rural, nontraditional, and marginalized students enrolled in distance education programs, which further impacted student diversity. The authors also noted unique challenges such as faculty preparedness and training, technical support, and administrative coordination for online learning. The authors also noted that although schools incorporated digital technologies, many continued to rely upon traditional methods of communication such as face-to-face or phone conversations.

Morton and colleagues (2019) further examined the impact of social media on implicit curriculum, and student engagement for 80 MSW students enrolled in on-ground and online programs. This is the first study to include online programs in assessing the impact of implicit curriculum on student outcomes. Literature on social media and educational engagement suggests that using social media and other technology improves learning outcomes, student experience, and student engagement (Morton et al., 2019). Students who found the use of social media to be positive in improving communication with peers and faculty also reported higher levels of engagement with the program and decision-making processes. Additionally, students in the online program reported higher levels of engagement, suggesting that technology can be used to enhance the learning environment, foster implicit curriculum participation, and enhance the overall student experience. The study's findings suggested that social media and other digital technology tools can increase connection with peers and faculty, which literature has shown is an important component of implicit curriculum.

Theoretical Frameworks: Social Learning and Engagement Theories

Social Learning Theory (Bandura, 1977) provides a framework for understanding the active and reciprocal nature of the learning process, which is influenced by internal and external factors such as motivation and environment. According to this theory, learning is seen as an exchange of ideas and knowledge, resulting in greater knowledge for all participants (Vygotsky, 1978; Wiest, 2015). Online education creates a new environment for learning and engagement, which can directly impact the learning process (Bernard et al., 2004; Dumford & Miller, 2018). Engagement theory evolved from online education to examine the level of student engagement in the learning process. Kearsley and Shneiderman (1999) emphasized the principles of engagement theory that students need to be meaningfully engaged in the learning process through challenges, activities, and peer interaction.

Furthermore, engagement theory explores using technology to promote student engagement through various tools such as discussion boards, group projects, videos, web tours, web-live classrooms, problem-based learning, and implicit curriculum activities (Wiest, 2015). Through these activities and tools, students with varied learning styles can engage in the learning process (Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1999). Conversely, the emerging theory differs from past technology theories where the importance was on the individual learning process or instruction method, while this theory emphasizes the group process (Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1999; Wiest, 2015). Prior research on student engagement identified six dimensions or themes to promote a sense of connection in higher education learning environments (Campbell et al., 2019). These six dimensions (Behavioral, Cultural,

Emotional, Intellectual, Physical, and Social) will serve as the themes used to code the qualitative data for this study.

Student Engagement Online Challenges

Online education has become the norm and even a necessity during the pandemic. However, skeptics have challenged the effectiveness of online education in producing similar outcomes to the traditional platform. Along with performance outcomes, skeptics have questioned the online platform's ability to provide the same level of connection, engagement, and community as the traditional learning environment (Thompson & YuKu, 2006; Wiest, 2015). For years, instructors have valued the need to foster connection, community, and engagement in the learning environment to promote social learning.

Video Conference Challenges

Instructors are faced with additional challenges in promoting and providing equal participation for all students in the online environment. As online technology has evolved, video conferencing has aided in developing connection and engagement. Students can participate in various activities to promote engagement, such as small groups, case studies, presentations, and small group discussions. Along with video conferencing, researchers have noted the benefits of using social networking in the online environment to foster a connection with peers in a low-stakes arena (Amador & Amador, 2014). When students are connected and engaged in the collaborative process, they can develop skills, think critically, and acquire new knowledge among peers (Bell et al., 2010; Wiest, 2015). However, the cameras can be an additional obstacle to navigating the virtual classroom due to disparate access (Reamer, 2013), increased anxiety and isolation (Gillett-Swan, 2017), and increased responsibilities (Stoessel et al., 2015). Instructors must be well trained in the tools available in the online platform to provide these learning opportunities, which foster engagement and connection (Shirvani, 2014; Wiest, 2015). Several researchers noted an additional challenge in the online platform to promote engagement and connection was the lack of social interaction outside of the classroom or traditional learning time (Drouin & Vartanian, 2010; Exter et al., 2009; Rabe-Hemp et al., 2009). Participants in the study mentioned this as a significant barrier. A recommendation to alleviate this barrier was for the program to provide alternative opportunities such as social groups or clubs, residency events for networking or collaboration, and mentoring or buddy partnering. This effort may well serve to underscore that the concern for engagement of online learning is one of the 12 Grand Challenges for the field of Social Work, noted by the American Academy of Social Work and Social Welfare, which calls for social workers to find effective ways to harness technology for social good (Coulton et al., 2015).

Bridging the Gap

Finding a balance in the online learning platform to enhance and develop connections is challenging. Instructors and students are faced with physical barriers, the need to balance competing priorities, and time differences across the world. Several researchers have

explored learning tools and pedagogy practices to foster connection and engagement. Many options have emerged to bridge the gap. Some of these are: (1) Hybrid programs with grounded learning dates; (2) Synchronous and asynchronous learning platforms; and (3) A grounded residency requirement during the program. A few studies examined the use of a hybrid format to foster community and engagement. The studies have noted that using a hybrid format provides an optimal learning environment and flexibility for all students. These platforms allow students to have autonomy in their learning and engage with peers to foster connection (Solimeno et al., 2008; Wiest, 2015).

Kazmer (2007) examined the use of a residency offering in a master's program for librarians. Residencies are defined as time-limited education sessions to provide in-depth training on key components in a field of study. The study found that students who participated in the residency program had a deep sense of community and connection with their peers and faculty that extended beyond graduation. The participants noted that this connection made group work and collaboration easier with their peers and faculty throughout the program. The students without the residency option developed peer relationships that were limited to specific classes and shorter in duration. The research suggested that providing face-to-face opportunities for students to connect with peers and instructors is an effective way to bridge the online environment gap.

Current Study Overview

Innovation has provided the opportunity for traditional and nontraditional students to pursue their learning goals. Using technology, students can attend school anywhere. Even more recently, during the COVID-19 pandemic, the education and business sectors could utilize innovative technology to provide valuable services. While technology is an invaluable tool, there are barriers to promoting engagement, community, and connection. The literature suggested several strategies to address the gaps to provide the optimal learning experience. This study will examine the use of a program residency to foster engagement and connection to bridge the online learning environment gap and enhance the social work student learning experience. The residency is a blend of the explicit and implicit curriculum, fostering a connection between students, with faculty, and their peers. This paper will examine the pedagogical strategies and use of a residency in an online Master Social Work (MSW) program to foster student engagement and bridge the virtual environment gap. The study will examine the benefits of a one-time residency in the MSW program to connect the students with peers and instructors via students' perceptions of engagement and connection during the residency.

Method

This study utilized a qualitative approach to data collection and analysis. Qualitative data were collected from a series of open-ended questions that explored the respondent's perceptions of academic engagement's six dimensions (Behavioral, Cultural, Emotional, Intellectual, Physical, and Social).

Study Design

This study was approved by the university's Institutional Review Board and employed a cross-sectional design leveraging an electronic survey administered via Qualtrics that asked students about their experience in the onsite residency. In addition to base demographics items, the study survey incorporated open-ended questions that expanded the learning from the structured questions. Lessons learned are summarized and explored in the discussion section of this paper.

On-Ground Residency Experience

The MSW program at a small Catholic liberal arts university in the southeastern region of the U.S. has built-in an academic expectation for all its students to participate in one on-campus intensive learning experience. This experience extends classroom-based learning through a series of interactive exercises that aim to amplify learning and promote student integration of key concepts in the profession of social work. This master's in social work (MSW) program requires students to attend an annual residency event offered one time per year. At the time of the residency, some students were enrolled in the three-year part-time program, some were in the two-year full-time program, and others were in the one-year advanced standing cohort. Table 1 provides a breakdown of demographics by cohort. Students from all three cohorts were enrolled in the same course throughout the semester and attended the residency together. The residency extends the interactive nature of their online program with this in-person event to apply their learning outside of the classroom (implicit learning) and to develop a collegial network aimed at student success.

For this study, the grounded residency focuses on leadership skills and invites the students to apply their prior virtual class learning through a group project in which they create the framework for a program aimed to promote social change. The student groups create, define, and present these program concepts to an expert panel for review. The panel provides feedback and applies a defined criterion/rubric to decide on the best project. This event is a highlight in the MSW program and provides a venue for students to display the University's core values of excellence, community, respect, personal development, responsible stewardship, and integrity.

Data Collection and Instrumentation

Students were asked to provide anonymous qualitative feedback about their residency experience. Students were asked to answer nine questions related to their experiences during the residency event. These included three open-ended questions about (1) the strengths of the event, (2) the least helpful components of the event, and (3) suggestions for improvement. The next three items asked about their experiences around the group project, such as (4) what were the strengths of participating in the project, (5) what areas could be improved upon, and (6) what could have been done differently. The final three items asked about the event's impact on their (7) connection to the MSW program, (8) connection to their peers, and (9) connection to their faculty members.

Sample

This study was conducted with two cohorts of MSW students attending a residency weekend during the summer of their advanced clinical practice year. The program routinely has an active student body of more than 200 students who learn in a cohort model with full-time, part-time, and advanced standing tracks. A total of 164 students participated in the two residency events. Most students were female (86.0%), and the mean age was 37.7 (SD = 10.02). White students made up 42.1% of all students, followed by Black or African American (34.2%) and Hispanic (14.6%). The plurality of students were full-time non-advanced standing students (42.1%), followed by part-time (31.1%) and advanced standing (26.4%). The demographics of the students attending the leadership residency are consistent with the program demographics. Overall, 131 students responded to the qualitative portion of the study, creating a response rate of 79.9%. Table 1 provides full sample demographics.

Table 1. *Sample Demographics (n=164)*

	<i>n (%)</i>
Gender	
Male	23 (14.0 %)
Female	141 (86.0%)
Race/Ethnicity	
White	69 (42.1%)
Black or African American	56 (34.2%)
Hispanic	24 (14.6%)
Unknown	13 (7.9%)
Two or More Races	2 (1.2%)
Asian	
Program Type	
Full-Time	69 (42.1%)
Part-Time	51 (31.1%)
Advanced Standing	44 (26.8%)
	Mean (<i>SD</i>)
Age	37.7 (10.02)

Data Analysis

SPSS (Version 26.0.0.1) was used to analyze all descriptive information, including frequencies, percentages, means, and standard deviations. All open-ended responses were coded using MaxQDA (version 12.3.3) using an a priori coding tree developed based on modes of engagement (Campbell et al., 2019). These included behavioral engagement, cultural engagement, emotional engagement, intellectual engagement, physical engagement, and social engagement. See Table 2 for a definition of the themes used. After identifying the initial themes, a second axial coding pass was used to identify subthemes. Research team members completed the coding and met to discuss the themes and subthemes until consensus was reached.

Table 2. *Definition of Themes*

Engagement	Definition in the context of the residency Perceived connection...
Behavioral	through activity
Cultural	through clarified identity
Emotional	with faculty
Intellectual	to academics
Physical	by proximity
Social	with peers

Results

The results of these data are presented and analyzed in this next section. The qualitative responses are offered to help frame context for the student's perceptions on how the residency impacts their experience with the six dimensions (Behavioral, Cultural, Emotional, Intellectual, Physical, and Social) of academic engagement.

Table 3. *Distribution of Themes and Subthemes (n=523)*

Theme and Subtheme	n (%)
Emotional	153 (29.3%)
Deeper Connection	55 (36.0%)
Meeting in Person	52 (34.0%)
Investment in Student	40 (26.1%)
Connection in Program	6 (3.9%)
Social	105 (20.1%)
Peer Friendships	70 (66.7%)
Faculty Relationships	27 (25.7%)
Professional Networking	8 (7.6%)
Physical	100 (19.1%)
Connection to Person	76 (76.0%)
Virtual Program Connection	15 (15.0%)
Connection by Location	9 (9.0%)
Cultural	57 (10.9%)
University/Program	27 (47.4%)
Profession	13 (22.8%)
Cohort	12 (21.1%)
Self	5 (8.8%)
Intellectual	56 (10.7%)
Programmatic Information	21 (37.5%)
Knowledge & Skills	17 (30.4%)
Assignment	7 (12.5%)
Team	7 (12.5%)
Dedicated Time and Space	4 (7.1%)
Behavioral	53 (9.9%)
Structure of Activities	25 (48.1%)
Class Activity Time	10 (19.2%)
Get to know you Activities	9 (17.3%)
Motivational Activities	6 (11.5%)
Capstone Activity	2 (3.9%)

A review of student feedback to open-ended survey questions was conducted to explore how students perceived the role of the residency in relation to the six dimensions (Behavioral, Cultural, Emotional, Intellectual, Physical, and Social) of academic engagement. Within each of the major dimensions of academic engagement, additional subthemes were identified, which provided context to the overall theme. These will be discussed in detail below, and an overview can be found in Table 3.

Emotional Engagement (*n Coded Segments = 153; 29.3%*)

The theme most frequently identified by students was emotional engagement. These made up 29.3% of all comments. Students defined four major subthemes related to emotional engagement, which were described as developing a deeper connection (36.0%), meeting in person (34.0%), faculty investment in students (26.1%), and connection to the program (3.9%).

The greatest area within emotional engagement was related to students developing a deeper connection and feeling closer to their classmates and professors. They noted that while they see each other weekly via web cameras, meeting in person created a stronger connection. While there has been constant class interaction across their time in the program through emails, texts, and telephone calls, the meeting in person created a bond that was not established through communication alone. This bond was enhanced as students shared time together both socially and academically. Even though they knew each other through synchronous online classes, the weekend created a connection they felt would last a long time as friends and future colleagues.

They also mentioned the ability to meet in person was beneficial. While previously they noted the face-to-face engagement gave them an opportunity to develop a deeper connection, a few students mentioned they enjoyed finally meeting people face-to-face that they had seen only in an online setting. Sometimes this was just a general statement that they enjoyed meeting in person with their faculty and peers. Others expanded on this to note that sometimes in-person meetings provided them with a better understanding. One student reiterated this by stating that "being from Virginia makes me feel very disconnected from the school, faculty, fellow students, and school activities but putting actual people to the names and faces we see regularly via webcam makes everyone real." A few students also noted that they felt more connected to the program. Students expressed this as feeling more included and having a sense of pride in the program.

The other major subtheme in emotional engagement was the students commenting that they saw a faculty commitment to the program and the students putting so much effort into the residency event. Overall, there were numerous comments about how the faculty showed an interest in them and sacrificed by traveling and engaging in the event. This was illustrated in student comments about how they felt cared about by the faculty who were invested in them as students and making sure students were successful in their careers. Overall, this theme was summed up by one student who noted:

The amount of positive energy and support that I have received from MSW students and professors is unconditional. It provided me a chance to meet everyone and

actually talk in person. I realized how different it is to talk to a person through media technology. I also observed how passionate all [University Name] professors are. Absolutely enjoyed. I feel valued and loved.

Social Engagement (*n* Coded Segments =105; 20.1%)

The second most frequently identified theme was social engagement which accounted for 20.1% of all comments. Students defined three major subthemes in social engagement, which were described as peer friendships (66.7%), faculty relationships (25.7%), and professional networking with aims both in the near and far terms of their professional development (7.6%).

Social engagement, through peer friendship, was the overwhelming theme in these student comments. Many of the students attending the residency had been taking classes together for years, further connecting with peers in person at the residency. One student summarized the sentiment involved in social engagement by noting they "...deeply enjoyed finally getting the opportunity to meet my classmates that I have been interacting with for two years now." They acknowledged how the residency offered some perspective on their academic progress, and the residency confirmed their online relationships. One student said they had "...been each other's biggest cheerleaders at times, so to see them face to face was great."

Connections with faculty was also a subtheme. The students reported that the residency gave them a chance to network "...with classmates and professors [which] was beneficial." Some commented that the in-person residency allowed the students to see the humanity in the faculty and staff. This can be seen in this comment where the student remarked about how much they enjoyed that, stating, "I have never seen faculty (even during my time on campus) joke and laugh with each other like this weekend."

They noted the opportunity for an in-person residency increased the possibility of professional networking. As one student stated, the residency gave them a chance for "...professional development in areas of group cohesion, structure, and development," while another said the residency stretched their professional horizons, and they are "...thinking about getting my Ph.D." Overall, social engagement was encapsulated in this student's comment:

The ability to meet with one's cohort brings a sense of connection. The original members I started with the first semester, built a good rapport with one another. Meeting in person, feeling the energy of others is essential; it lets you know you indeed are not alone. These people you are surrounded by are going through it all with you. With the rigorous schedule from semester to semester, it is easy to feel a little burn-out, [the residency] helped connect and bring a spark and strength to continue forward.

Physical Engagement (*n Coded Segments =100; 19.1%*)

Nineteen percent of students defined three major subthemes related to physical engagement, which were described as a connection to a person (76.0%), through an extension of the virtual program connection (15.0%), and a connection by location (9.0%).

Physical engagement through a connection to a person was the overwhelming theme in this category. One student said it felt "... like you are actually classmates - not just pictures on a screen [which] made this program 10x better." Students noted a sense of camaraderie and connection with their peers through in-person networking, active learning with projects, and socialization and downtime. One student noted that at the onset of the residency, they "...thought meeting my classmates would be awkward, but it was amazing."

The extension of the virtual classroom into physical engagement was a highlight for many students. They mentioned how the onsite residency was a direct extension of their synchronous virtual classes. One student put it this way. "I got the chance to see my classmates and professors in person and not just on a screen. This created a sense of unity I had not felt." They also commented about the many ways that being in the same physical place led to a connection by location. One student comment summed up the overall sense of physical engagement through the residency in this way:

We took pictures, laughed together, cried together, etc. It was awesome. It's strange, you'd think the atmosphere would be weird since, up until this point, we've always interacted via webcam, but when we saw each other in person, it honestly felt like we'd known each other for years. It was an amazing feeling.

Cultural Engagement (*n Coded Segments =57; 10.9%*)

Students defined four major subthemes related to cultural engagement, which were described as the university and MSW program (47.4%), the social work profession (22.8%), their cohort (21.1%), and self (8.8%).

The most frequently mentioned area of cultural engagement was student's connection to the institution and the program. Students talked about having more profound knowledge and understanding of the university system and program requirements. They also noted that the residency helped them create a stronger sense of affiliation and connection to the university and the MSW program. Some students even emphasized the sense of pride and belonging that was engendered during this weekend. Not surprisingly, some students overtly talked about their resistance to attending (investment of energy, time, money) but were surprised how the residency overcame those challenges and created a sense of connection.

The next area that students commented about was how the residency promoted a deeper understanding and appreciation for the profession of social work generally. Students talked about how they experienced a sense of belonging to a group of others who shared similar ideals and values related to caring for vulnerable populations and one another. One student framed this in the context of how residencies can work "... towards the higher notions of what Social Work is and what all of us are working towards and hope to achieve."

The final two subthemes were related to cultural engagement with their academic cohort and their own personal growth. Students talked about how the residency promoted a sense of commitment to their teammates and themselves in general professional development and the execution of specific tasks. One student remarked that the residency helps with fostering an environment that promotes community and support among cohorts. A student said they were academically focused before the weekend but now they "feel emotionally attached" to the program.

Overall, students summed up cultural engagement in the residency as:

[Through the residency] I was able to connect my heart. For me, it has and always will be the heart! Not just talent!! ... This weekend gave me the feeling like I was a part of something much more than a digitally-driven entity. This weekend fostered a sense of belonging... [I have] reassurance that some of the professors, providing golden nuggets of wisdom in person. Being on campus and connecting to the school's core values was felt so strongly walking on the grounds. It's a very special place.

Intellectual Engagement (*n Coded Segments =56; 10.7%*)

Intellectual engagement accounted for 10.7% of comments. Within intellectual engagement, students identified four major subthemes, which were described as programmatic information (37.5%), knowledge and skills (30.4%), assignments (12.5%), team (12.5%), and dedicated time and space (7.1%).

The highest subtheme within intellectual engagement was related to programmatic information. In this area, students remarked how the weekend setup provided information about the program and specific aspects of their learning experience. This might include their faculty advisor's role, activities, or events available to them and that the breakout sessions provided during the event were beneficial to them. These breakout sessions covered various faculty-led topics around issues such as organizations, student groups, field experiences, and an opportunity to engage with the program director.

Another subtheme in intellectual engagement was the knowledge and skills students reported learning or practicing during the residency event. Students reported learning new skills and being able to practice other skills during this event. These might be soft skills such as working with peers, engaging with colleagues, or specific mental health treatment or suicide prevention skills. These were combined with tips and tricks during the weekend that provided a stronger knowledge base for students moving forward in the program. The other areas that students mentioned were the assignments, teams, and having dedicated time and space for learning activities. For assignments, students talked about collaborating, learning while working as a team, and having the dedicated time and space to practice their skills. Interestingly, some students noted that some of the skills they learned were about how to interact with a team as they worked on a project together. Overall, the notion of intellectual engagement was summed up by a student who stated:

The class, its content, and structure were confusing, and its inclusion in the social work curriculum made absolutely no sense to me until [the residency] weekend.

The venture project seemed like a complete waste of time, but in order for social workers to affect change on the micro, mezzo, and macro level, there needs to be the comprehension and composition of the communities and organizations that will be our conduits to creating necessary change.

Behavioral Engagement (*n Coded Segments =52; 9.9%*)

Almost ten percent of comments were related to behavioral engagement. Students defined five major subthemes related to behavioral engagement, which were described as the structure of activities (48.1%), time-related to explicit learning activities (19.2%), "get to know you" activities (17.3%), motivational activities (11.5%), and capstone activities (3.9%).

When discussing the structure of activities, the students discussed how the residency weekend was crafted to encourage engagement and learning. They noted that the residency structure allotted time to spend with peers and program faculty, which further promoted behavioral engagement. The students also specifically mentioned the breakout sessions, which were individualized small group sessions facilitated by faculty which covered aspects of the program, ways for students to be involved in explicit learning activities, the profession of social work, and the student's ability to be successful in graduate education.

Students also mentioned they appreciated the dedicated time to work on their projects with their teammates. Some said they had anxiety about presenting and having the time to work on the class assignment was appreciated. This helped them feel supported in this assignment as a student-led project, and faculty gave them the time to prepare their "Shark Tank" capstone activity. Finally, students mentioned additional activities that allowed them to get to know each other and their professor. Other activities enhanced their motivation to engage in personal and professional growth. One student spoke about how one session inspired them to be more actively involved in social justice:

LEAD [Legislative Education Advocacy Day] and the [programs] Academic Excellence Virtual Conference ... inspired me to continue to go strong in wanting to pursue my career in advocacy. I decided to take part in the LEAD initiative this year.

Another student summed up the residency experiences as:

Every aspect of the weekend contributed to my personal and professional growth. Although the anticipation of experiencing the Shark Tank was a bit [un]nerving, the outcomes of the experience were amazing. Once our team began the presentation, all of our hard work and preparation came together. We created a solid presentation. I enjoyed every moment.

Discussion

Since March 2020, more than 1,400 schools have had to close their doors in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (Kelly & Columbus, 2020). With the outbreak of the pandemic and increased social distancing protocols, universities transitioned to various modes of

teaching such as e-learning and hybrid instruction to minimize safety risks for students and faculty. Although critics of online learning question the quality of online education compared to traditional learning (Thompson & YuKu, 2006; Wiest, 2015), the literature supports the impact that online learning can have on student diversity, engagement, and community (Drouin & Vartanian, 2010; Shirvani, 2014). Unfortunately, for many schools, the swift transition to online learning presented additional challenges for many students, such as increased isolation (Son et al., 2020), environmental distractors (Kanik, 2021), increased responsibilities (Horowitz, 2020), and emotional and psychological distress (Kee, 2021) which can have a direct and indirect impact on social connections.

As schools make decisions about the return to on-ground learning, many academic programs will have to pivot to incorporate increased flexibility in teaching modes while striving to maintain academic rigor and student engagement (Kelly & Columbus, 2020). For social work programs, this includes an emphasis on explicit and implicit curricula in both on-ground and online programs. Engagement theory highlights the impact of technology on fostering various forms of student engagement (Campbell et al., 2019; Kearsley & Shneiderman, 1999), which can be particularly beneficial for online social work programs.

This article highlights the potential impact of an on-ground residency in promoting student engagement in a fully online MSW program. Although students were enrolled in an online program, the opportunity to come together for an on-ground residency fostered emotional engagement. Students reported feeling a deeper connection to their peers and faculty members. During a time when many students report increased anxiety and emotional distress due to COVID-19 (Gonzalez et al., 2020; Kapasia et al., 2020), the findings of this study support the need for programs to incorporate activities that can promote emotional engagement for students.

Additionally, the shift to online education has resulted in many students reporting dissolved or reduced social connections (Finnegan-Kressie et al., 2020). The findings of this study highlight the impact that face-to-face interactions can have on increasing social connections for many students. These results support existing literature that highlights how student encounters with both the explicit and implicit curriculum can enhance student connections and professionalization (Miller, 2013; Peterson et al., 2014). Lastly, findings from this study emphasize the importance of physical engagement for students regardless of the learning modality. Although students reported developing connections in an online setting, being in a physical space extends existing connections and allows for enhanced connection in an online space.

The students noted a deeper connection to the program. Students reported a sense of pride in being in the program. Students expressed the social benefits of meeting in-person to build relationships and network opportunities not always available in the virtual classroom. Moreover, the residency allowed the ability to physically meet and foster relationships that developed long-lasting friends in the professional arena. Overall, the students expressed appreciation for participating in a program that enhances their learning experience. Students cherished the commitment the faculty demonstrated to the program, event, and students' learning.

The event appears to have provided an enriching experience to heighten the virtual classroom. With an increase in online social work education programs, residencies can serve as an opportunity to bridge the gap for online students to enhance a sense of community (Kazmer, 2007). Many times, residencies are built around academic content to extend the classroom. However, this study reveals that students appreciate the opportunity to learn collaboratively, allowing them to develop a sense of a shared culture with their peers, program, and university. This is important for programs to consider as they make decisions for the return to campus. Additionally, programs should consider how shifts in social work education will meet accreditation standards and assessments for online instruction, instructional design, and technological capability, which can enhance the student experience in a virtual landscape (Horowitz, 2020).

Limitations

As with all studies, this study has a few limitations that should be noted. First, the sample came from a specific group of students in one MSW program. The absence of a comparable control group limits the generalizability of the study results and the complicating fact that students in this study attended the residency as a requirement of their MSW program participation further challenges any confirmatory findings. Students are enrolled in this program with the awareness that all the classes would be virtual and synchronous in nature. It is possible that the nature of these synchronous classes contributed to the report of a high sense of cohesion or that students self-selected this type of program and naturally have a high sense of cohesion. To address these limitations in the future, we recommend looking across multiple universities, varied cohort models, and divergent online modalities (synchronous and asynchronous).

Future studies should consider collecting data at program entry, immediately prior to the residency, and then again upon completion of the residency. This could provide valuable information about engagement and the importance of cohesion across the program. It is important to note that these data are derived from an MSW program built around a cohort model for student learning. It is unclear how a residency may impact programs with less emphasis on student cohorts as an organizing structure with implicit expectations of group cohesion. Similarly, self-selection bias may be present with students attending a cohort model because they seek cohesion; further research in programs with and without cohort models would add knowledge in this area.

Given the impact of COVID-19 on social isolation and the move of many students online, it is possible that since the data were collected pre-COVID-19, these results might underreport many of the impacts of engagement. This study offered a cross-sectional view of one cohort's responses. Future research would benefit from exploring a longitudinal approach to data that allows a deeper analysis of engagement over time. Finally, the response rates to the survey were almost 80%. We recognize that there was no ability to follow up with additional questions or clarification to the open-ended items. Using student interviews or focus groups could shed additional context about their engagement, challenges, or positives.

Implications

As COVID-19 social distancing restrictions are lifted, there will be ample consideration for efforts and events that leverage social connections. One area for this consideration will be in higher education programs that deliver primarily online content and may be considering the impact of grounded residencies to augment virtual learning. Based on these data, grounded residencies demonstrate tangible value to graduate social work students in an online program and promote a high level of engagement across multiple stakeholder groups.

The pandemic experience has promoted a radical shift in business delivery, especially in the social work and social service sectors. Prior to the pandemic, social work educators were wrestling with the market forces pushing toward the increased use of online platforms to deliver higher education to social work students. Those pressures are likely to intensify in a post-pandemic space. Even though many programs are adopting some aspect of online delivery, these data suggest they should also consider strategic opportunities, such as grounded residencies, to keep students engaged in person.

These grounded residencies can be resource-intensive (time, energy, money). Students in this program had to take time away from family, work, and other commitments to attend this residency over the weekend. Graduate students have a considerable amount of pressure on their time and energy resources which can add stress, and the financial cost of managing their own travel for transportation, lodging, and housing are additional burdens. Despite these known stressors, these data indicate that the students saw this residency as an investment that creates a new opportunity for learning and a profound sense of connectedness. These outcomes should translate into improved results with student learning, retention, and the recruitment of future students and emotional connection to the program and the institution garnered from an in-person/grounded connection which could yield potential philanthropic giving from alumni. Future research will benefit from exploring these indirect benefits.

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