

## The Value of a Social Work Degree: Public Social Service Agency Directors' Views

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### Abstract

Social service agency directors are responsible for hiring social workers that have the knowledge and skills to serve vulnerable children and families. However, there are public social service agencies that employ social workers who do not have degrees in social work. While there are many reasons for hiring decisions, this study focuses on the views of 185 public social service agency directors on hiring social workers with degrees in social work. For those directors who agreed that social workers should have degrees in social work only one theme emerged, this theme emphasized that social workers with accredited degrees in social work have specialized knowledge and skills that go beyond training and work experience. The overall findings from this study may be useful to aspiring social service agency directors, supervisors, educators, and mentors.

**Keywords:** recruitment, employment, education, social workers, social services

Is there value in or a need for a social work degree for social workers in social work agencies and organizations? Given that in some states, public social service agencies hire social workers without degrees in social work (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2000), it begs the question of what is the view of those hiring social workers, even more specifically what is the hiring view of those with the final say on who is hired, the agency or organization director. While there are directors who believe that social workers do not need degrees in social work (Austin, Johnson, Chow, De Marco, & Ketch, 2009; NASW, 2006) there are many reasons that might influence a social service director to hire individuals without social work degrees. There clearly is an ongoing need to see how others view the value of a social work degree.

Sometimes state legislation dictates what education and work experiences social workers should have to work in public social service agencies. Social workers, employed by public social service agencies, have complex caseloads, work long hours, and are poorly paid (Morris, 2005). These challenges are often compounded by stressful work environment, training deficiencies and staffing shortages (Clark, Gilman, Jacquet, Johnson, Mathias, Paris & Zeitler, 2008). Economic hard times, employee layoffs and early retirement pay offs sometimes leave these agencies with social workers who have limited child welfare education, training and experience. Education professional experiences, geographical location, salaries, and administrative policies can also impact who applies for these positions (Blosser, Cadet, & Downs, 2010).

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As a result, some public social service agencies experience difficulties in recruiting and retaining social workers, and end up hiring social workers without degrees in social work. Could this mean that workers are being hired that do not have the proper knowledge and skills to serve vulnerable children and families? Internal labor markets and external labor markets form the sociological theoretical underpinnings of this current study. Labor markets are viewed as arenas where employees exchange labor for wages, position titles and employee rewards that are based on a set of organizational policies and procedures.

Internal labor markets consist of a cluster of jobs that have three characteristics. The first characteristic is a career ladder comprised of sequenced positions. The entrance into internal labor markets through entry level positions is the second characteristic, and the third characteristic is acquiring knowledge and skills as one climbs the career ladder. External labor markets are arenas where employers hire persons outside their organizations instead of promoting employees from within their organizations. Those persons hired outside the organization may not meet position description education and work experience requirements. When applying this framework to this study, it is persons without accredited degrees in social work who are competing against persons with degrees in social work (Social Work Reform Board, 2013; Althausen & Kallenberg, 1981).

In that it is social service agency directors' responsibility to ensure that qualified social workers are providing adequate children and family services (NASW, 2006) because when major crises occur, it is those directors that must respond to their constituents (Clark, Gilman, Jacquet, Johnson, Mathias, Paris & Zeitler, 2008). Given the serious implications of hiring qualified personnel to serve these populations it is important to better understand the hiring views of social service directors. As a result it will be helpful to obtain additional information as to why social service agency directors hire persons without degrees in social work.

## **2. Methodology**

### **2.1 Sample**

A sample of 430 department social service agency directors employed in Georgia, Virginia, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Maryland were surveyed about their professional experiences and views regarding hiring persons with degrees in social work. These states were identified because a significant number of authors' university graduates tend to migrate to these states for employment. Names of agency directors and mailing addresses were obtained from each state's department of social services web sites. The surveys were mailed between June and December 2006. Of the 430 mailed surveys, 185 usable surveys were received with a 43% response rate (Brown, 2008).

### **2.2 Instrument**

To strengthen reliability and validity of data, the survey was developed from a prior study examining demographic information, career pathways, and experiences of college presidents (Touchton, Shavlik and Davis, 1993). The survey was reviewed for clarity and face validity by having five social service agency directors complete the survey and provide feedback. Additionally, a social work faculty member and a statistician reviewed the survey questions and format. A 47 item and 6 page survey, containing multiple choice and open ended questions, was used to collect data. This study focused on questions pertaining to work experiences, educational background, agency characteristics, other demographics, and agency directors' views on persons, employed by public social service agencies, having degrees in social work.

Measurement of validity and reliability are important considerations when collecting data using self-report surveys. Data collection for this study was highly structured and likely valid because respondents were asked factual information about their professional and demographic backgrounds. In addition, these researchers were interested in the average response of the total group of respondents rather than their individual responses; therefore, a lower item reliability standard was acceptable because the data were analyzed and reported as the group rather than the individual respondents' level (Gall, Borg, & Gall, 1996).

### **2.3 Design and Data Collection Procedures**

The data for this qualitative study were collected between June and December 2006. Self-administered surveys and cover letters, explaining the study's purpose and requesting directors' participation were mailed. A self-addressed stamped envelope accompanied each cover letter and survey. To preserve each director's confidentiality, coded self-addressed stamped postcards were used to help determine which director's completed and mailed their survey. Instructions for completing and mailing survey and postcards were provided in the letter and on the survey.

Respondents were instructed to mail the postcard separately from the survey. The postcards were used to identify respondents that did not need reminders to complete the survey. Non-responders received a reminder letter and a second copy of the survey three weeks after the first mailing (Brown, 2008).

## **2.4 Data Analysis**

The data were coded into SPSS 16 system by category and variable number. Prior to data entry, data were examined to identify any inconsistencies and accuracy. Missing responses to survey questions were coded missing or not applicable. The sample size varied for questions providing multiple responses. The frequency distributions were converted to percentages of the total responses. Descriptive statistics were used to summarize demographic data. Chi-square tests with an alpha level of .05 and cross-tabulations were used to analyze selected nominal and ordinal level variables (e.g. gender, age). For additional information see Brown (2008).

## **3 Results**

### **3.1 Demographics**

One hundred eighty-five social service directors completed the survey. For this study of the 185 surveys, 180 surveys were usable. The number of women and men who completed the survey was almost equal (56.1% women, n=101). Whites (86.7%, n=156) comprised the majority of all agency directors. The remaining were Black 12.2% (n=22). Respondents' ages ranged from 31 to 69 with the mean age of 63 (SD=9.8). Only 12.8 % (n=23) hold the undergraduate degree in social work. Those holding a master's degree in social work was 26.1% (n=47).

### **3.2 Agency Characteristics**

Geographic locations of respondents' agencies were North Carolina, Georgia, Virginia, Maryland, and South Carolina with North Carolina having the highest response rate (34.1%, n=63). Most of respondents' agencies were located in rural areas (71.9%, n=133). The number of persons employed by respondents' agencies ranged from 7 to 1,200 with the mean number of 97.7 employees.

### **3.3 Views on Hiring Social Workers with Degrees in Social Work**

In regards to respondents' views on hiring social workers with degrees, the majority (68.1%, n=126) of respondents disagreed that only persons who have degrees in social work should be called social workers. When comparing respondents' education with their views pertaining to only persons with degrees in social work should be called social workers, chi-square analysis suggested that respondents without degrees in social work were more likely,  $X^2 = 39.256$ ,  $p < .001$  to disagree that only persons with the degrees should be called social workers. In the survey comment section, directors discussed why or why not social workers should have degrees in social work.

Two themes emerged from their comments: 1) a degree in social work does not qualify one to become a social worker; and 2) only persons with degrees in social work should be allowed to practice social work. Respondents indicated that social work skills can be taught on the job and that there are not enough persons with degrees in social work who want to work in public social service agencies. Directors repetitively stated that persons with degrees in social work did not have the skills, knowledge or desire to work in social service agencies. Other directors stated that social work graduates were not academically prepared to work in public social service agencies, and they tend to "analyze" clients but do not have the skills to work effectively with their clients. For those directors who agreed that social workers should have degrees in social work only one theme emerged, and this theme emphasized that social workers with accredited degrees in social work have specialized knowledge and skills that go beyond training and work experience. One respondent wrote that, social workers should have a knowledge base that focuses on theory and practice. Another respondent noted, "If you don't have a degree in your program area, the courts and other professionals will not take you seriously."

## **4. Discussion**

The majority of respondents reported that they chose social work as a career because they wanted to make a difference. It is common knowledge that rural social service agencies struggle to recruit and retain persons with social work degrees, and since the majority of respondents in this study reported that their agencies are located in rural areas, it was not surprising that the majority of these respondents did not have degrees in social work.

In regards to the second research question, are directors without degrees in social work more likely to agree that social workers should not be required to have degrees in social work, the majority of respondents answered yes. Based on their responses some social work graduates may be facing challenges of proving their value to agency directors. Many respondents felt that persons with degrees in social work did not have the necessary knowledge and skills to become social workers. Many respondents felt that anyone can do social work as long as they are willing to learn how to perform social work through "on the job training." In response to the latter findings social work educators may want to have conversations with social service directors and review social work curricular to determine if there is truth to these statements.

Analysis of directors' suggestions revealed that many of the respondents want to work collaboratively with social work educators in producing and preparing "competent" social workers. Agency directors suggested: a) providing more opportunities for students to serve as interns in social service agencies; b) offering shorter internships in social service agencies followed by completing required internships; c) establish an adult service and workforce collaborative similar to the Child Welfare Collaborative; d) offering social work degree programs in social service agencies; or e) offer a one year or a 15 semester hour Social Work Certificate Program for those social workers who do not have degrees in social work.

### **5 Implications for Social Work Practice**

Since social service agencies are one of the largest employers of social workers it is assumed a number of social work education programs have student internships in social service agencies and that social services directors serve on schools of social work advisory councils. Social work educators and social service agency directors need to come to the table to discuss the educational needs and training experiences of social service directors and aspirants. To increase the number of social service agency directors with accredited degrees in social work, social work educators, mentors and professional associations should endow potential and aspiring social work directors with the knowledge and skills needed to become effective administrators. This can be accomplished by identifying and encouraging potential prospects to consider administration and provide opportunities for prospects to acquire the necessary knowledge and skills for those administrative roles through workshops and conferences. Educators should identify prospective directors while their students are enrolled in school and early in their careers. Educators and social work professional association members can promote the value of having a social work degree by having ongoing dialogues with agency directors regarding what students need to know to become effective social workers in social service agencies and provide opportunities for agency directors to review curriculum and provide feedback.

When one reviews the suggestions from respondents who do not feel a social work degree is necessary it seems their responses are contradictory. Their suggestions on how schools of social work can prepare persons for social work practice gives the appearance respondents feel there may be value to having a degree in social work.

Social workers who graduate from accredited social work programs are competing against an external labor market that is comprised of persons who do not have degrees in social work. Some of those who do not have social work degrees are applying and attaining social work jobs. If we are going to groom students to become social workers in social service agencies, it is critical that social work education programs consider having or maintaining relationships with public social service agencies. It is not enough for social workers and administrators to serve on social work education advisory boards and faculty inviting them to speak to students during class lectures. Directors may consider becoming actively engaged with faculty who teach social work courses. Social workers, administrators and faculty should be designing curricular and evaluating student outcomes followed by making necessary curriculum changes based on findings. During discussion, areas of focus could be course content, assignments, assigned readings, exam development and development of case scenarios for classroom activities. As mentioned earlier, rural social service agencies experience difficulties in recruiting persons with degrees in social work. Due to client demands some social service agency directors cannot wait for persons with degrees in social work to apply for social worker positions.

There is a continuous need to identify and implement innovative strategies to support social workers with BSW and MSW degrees and recruit students who are interested in working in social service agencies in the early stages in their careers. Social work graduate education programs and professional associations should continue to assess how we prepare our social work students and social workers for top leadership positions in social service agencies.

In addition, social work professional organizations need to become more engaged in the professional preparation of aspiring social work administrators.

### 5.1 Limitations and Recommendations

Due to a small size, the results from this study cannot be generalized. As a result, it is suggested that this study be replicated with a larger sample size to determine whether study participants are representative of the population of agency directors.

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