

# A Guided Review of Top-10 Rated Social Work Education Program Websites: Diversity in the Digital Age

SAGE Open  
July-September 2017: 1–7  
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DOI: 10.1177/2158244017721583  
journals.sagepub.com/home/sgo  


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## Abstract

Increasingly, higher education is a competitive industry, with students considering numerous schools through which to obtain their college degrees. Many prospective students rely on the programs' websites to inform their decisions. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) accredits schools of social work based on standards set forth in its Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) for bachelor- and master-level education. The EPAS document sets forth specific directives for programs' missions and goals, and explicit and implicit curriculum and assessment. The goal of this study was to conduct a content analysis of the websites of top-rated social work education programs with special attention to their diversity content. Analysis of diversity content is crucial to increase the utility of the websites for potential applicants. Implications for future research and practice are discussed.

## Keywords

diversity, social work education, website, curriculum, recruitment, social work students

In many ways, the Internet has fundamentally changed the way consumers acquire information about a variety of goods and services, as well as the ways in which they select service providers through services such as Craigslist and Angie's List. Americans with online access report online searches as their second most frequent online activity behind email-related activities (Fox, 2011). In fact, nearly 84% of Americans with Internet access reported the use of a search engine, and 66% reported the use of a search engine at least 2 times every week (Fox, 2011). As far back as the late 1990s, various researchers found that a strong majority of colleges and universities were using the World Wide Web as one of many channels to communicate with prospective students (Kittle & Ciba, 2001).

In relation to consumers using the Internet for selecting institutions of higher learning, Chapin and Fitzgerald (2002) published survey findings indicating that nearly two thirds of people they surveyed used college/department websites as a source to decide what graduate program they would attend. Nearly one in four of those students stated that online webpages were their primary source of information used to select programs. This makes the web presence of schools a real and highly utilized asset in reaching out to prospective students.

Chapin and Fitzgerald (2002), as well as Kittle and Ciba (2001), report telling trends in how their respective survey respondents used the information on the websites. Most often, the information about admission processes and availability of financial aid funding were useful; however, the

people whom they surveyed were not interested in the various and specific allocations of those resources. They also were not interested in detailed research interests and publication histories of faculty, but instead, they found the short bibliographic and photographic information useful. Finally, the people they surveyed rarely used the external linking functions to extra information sources; they preferred to merely know of the presence of these resources. Overall, their findings suggest that students are very interested in a brief overview and one that quickly illustrates an overall picture of the experience of going to a program for graduate studies.

More recent admissions work has observed that these earlier findings by Chapin and Fitzgerald (2002) are a continuing trend in the selection process for students considering selecting an institution of higher learning. In *Recruitment and Retention in Higher Education* ("Interactive Agent Gives Students the Answers They Need," 2004), the interviewed admissions officer spoke of the shortening attention span of the average applicant to their program. His program made the quick accessibility and communication of highly salient factors a primary focal point for all of their online efforts.

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The United States system of higher education is a vast network of over 4,600 public, private, for-profit, and not-for-profit institutions of higher learning, educating some 20 million students (Carnegie Foundation, 2012). There are some observable trends in what those student bodies look like in terms of their diversity. As recently as 2010, while Latino students increased by about 5%, the number of Black students saw a decrease of more than 8%. These numbers bring the issue of recruitment and retention to the forefront of schools' minds as they plan for the future of their programs. In fact, Griffin and Muniz (2011) indicated that diverse student recruitment is frequently a target of interest and cited as a challenge for recruitment efforts at institutions of higher education.

### Higher Education and Prospective Students

The ability of a program to capture the initial interest of the student once they have landed at the program's website appears to be a quick and topical approach by prospective students that many administrators feel is not being done successfully. Ramasubramanian, Gyure, and Mursi (2002) published findings from their study that manipulated the architectural and green-space portrayal of a fictitious campus and their effects on students' ratings of the program. They found that the visual imagery of these two domains was a significant predictor of differential feelings of things like the prestige of the program and likelihood of attendance. Thus, the online environment also has very direct influence on cognitive and behavioral intentions. While many colleges and universities may not experience difficulty with being known to prospective students, they also face challenges with communicating the diversity among their campus communities to overcome prospective students' potential feelings of isolation and loneliness (Quarterman, 2008) should they choose to enroll in the program. As Quarterman's (2008) findings illustrate, many programs face more pervasive funding issues than anything else, but secondary concerns regarding issues of diversity and inclusiveness are also of significant concern to college personnel interested in the composition of their student body.

### Social Work Education

The social work profession has shifted its theoretical development of diversity education from the perspective of assimilation in the 1950s to the current perspective of a social constructivist approach to teaching, incorporating students' narratives into social work education (Kohli, Huber, & Faul, 2010). The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) accredits schools of social work in the United States, Puerto Rico, and Guam, based on standards set forth in its Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) for bachelor- and master's-level education. CSWE began requiring diversity

content in accredited social work education in 1992 (Garcia & Van Soest, 1997). The most recent EPAS, released by CSWE in 2008, require specific aspects of diversity content in the explicit curricula of accredited social work education programs. In EPAS, diversity is defined as "the intersectionality of multiple factors including age, class, color, culture, disability, ethnicity, gender, gender identity and expression, immigration status, political ideology, race, religion, sex, and sexual orientation" (CSWE, 2008, pp. 4-5). The EPAS document was used to guide this review because programs would be familiar with the structure of the document and its directives. With the increasing diversity among social work program participants, the recruitment and retention of diverse social work students and practitioners has become a major concern for baccalaureate social work programs (Clark, Garza, & Hipple, 2003). Joyner (2005) advocated for the development of marketing training modules for undergraduate social work programs to attract and educate diverse students. This study seeks to examine one key strategy of recruiting such a student body—the top-rated social work programs' website content aimed at attracting prospective students.

### Method

#### Study Purpose

This study analyzes website content and/or documents coded for their ability to convey the respective programs' engagement in activities that address the multi-dimensional and intersectional understanding of diversity as defined in the EPAS (2008) document, social and economic well-being, their contribution in their local community to the provision of effective social services, and advancing human rights and social and economic justice.

*Sample/population selection.* Data for the project were collected from the top-10 ranked schools by "Best Social Work Programs" (2011) from June through August 2011 by a three-member research team from a Midwestern university. Two members are doctoral students in the College of Social Work's PhD program and one is a faculty member within the same college. Data were collected solely from Internet-based sources of information and therefore were not subject to institutional review board (IRB) review per the advice of the university's IRB.

The team divided the project into two main foci. The first, and subject of this article, was the analysis of web-based content at each of the top-10 ranked schools by "Best Social Work Programs" (2011), which yielded a sample of 11 schools (due to ties for place rankings). The focus of the second analysis was the population of Assistant Professors' and Professors' Curricula Vitae (CV) from the 11 schools in the sample of program websites. These findings will be reported in forthcoming publications.

U.S. News and World Report assemble rankings of schools annually. Considered a standardized view of schools to be used in conjunction with independent student and family research, the ranking list is a widely used resource in making higher education decisions. In 2011, rankings were assembled for the first time for social work programs. These rankings were determined through data collected from a variety of methodologies. Surveys were sent to deans and senior faculty to rank programs using a Likert-type scale. The magazine also assembled statistical indicators such as standardized-test scores and postgraduation job placement rates. Ultimately, the magazine used standardized scores that ranked the list of programs relative to their highest ranking peer (Flanigan & Morse, 2012). The resulting top-10 list was used by the research team to identify a sample of social work program websites thought to be ranked in a standardized way and disseminated in a widely read resource for students and families.

#### *Data coding*

**Website content.** The guiding document for all coding of the data was the 2008 EPAS created by the (CSWE), the accrediting body for social work programs in the United States. This document is a handbook of accreditation policies and procedures. The EPAS document establishes guidelines for all programs to be comparatively similar to obtain accreditation, while allowing room for programs to respond and adapt to local contexts and needs. There are four main features covered in the EPAS: program mission and goals, explicit curriculum, implicit curriculum, and assessment. As all of the schools from the “Best Social Work Programs” (2011) are accredited, their explicit curriculum was considered adequate and not analyzed as part of this project. However, the other three areas (program mission and goals, implicit curriculum, and assessment) were analyzed by the team, and specifically, the means of and extent to which each respective program’s website communicated information about each area.

#### *Program Demographics*

From each of the websites of the 11 schools included in the sample, the programs’ mission, goals, and values were collected for analysis when they were available. Also collected were any other statements made in streaming content areas or webpage headers that somehow communicated guiding principles or aims of the program. The types of degrees were coded as to whether the school awarded bachelor’s, master’s, or PhD-level degrees.

#### *Picture Content*

The picture content of each site was analyzed and coded according to the displayed images’ portrayal of diversity. Diversity was defined on the dimensions of presumed age,

disability, ethnicity, gender identity and expression, race, religion, sex, and sexual orientation.

#### *Student Organizations*

Information included on each of the reviewed schools’ sites about student organizations was collected for analysis. Student organization information was coded on dimensions of age, culture, disability, gender, gender identity and expression, immigration status, political ideology, race, religion, sex, and sexual orientation.

#### *Program Activities, Symposia, and Events*

Information about program-promoted, diversity-related events in the school and community was collected and coded. The coding dimensions for the events included age, disability, culture, gender, gender identity, immigration status, political ideology, race, religion, sex, and sexual orientation. Information about program events was collected for the period of time from the 2006 to 2011 academic years.

#### *Field Education*

The signature pedagogical technique of the social work profession is the engagement of students in field education. Field education (student internships) has been a component of social work education since its inception and continues to be a cornerstone. Social work education programs in the sample were coded for providing comprehensive information to students, via website content, about the field education program. Also noted is whether this information was provided in alternative formats (e.g., formats allowing adaptive technologies to read content to blind users or subtitles to make any video content accessible to deaf and hard of hearing users) to increase accessibility of the information. The research team also recorded whether this information was provided in any language other than English, again to accommodate a diverse prospective student population.

#### *Policy Practice*

Also unique to the field of social work is the profession’s specific and explicit requirement to affect change within various levels of the system or community within which the social worker conducts her or his work. Accredited educational programs must include experiential learning for students aimed at each of these as well.

#### *Diversity of Administrative Structure*

The EPAS document outlines the specific educational criteria that key members of the administrative team should possess. Data about the dean, social work program director, and the field education director, when provided on the website,

were coded for various demographic characteristics including presumed ethnicity, gender, and race of each of these key roles in the programs.

### Assessment

Finally, the EPAS document specifies that certain assessment activities should be conducted by the program on an ongoing basis to maintain these standards during periods between accreditation review and re-establishment. The website content was coded based on the availability of a document outlining the programs' plans for this activity. The research team also coded whether specific and detailed explanations were available of how students address concerns with the programs' progress toward effectively addressing issues of change, diversity, or ethics.

### Results

All of the websites contained at least some information about diversity issues specifically related to the research team's variables of interest. The degrees to which they addressed diversity in these different variables varied from very comprehensive to minimal representation. For instance, one program website has a page devoted to diversity at the school of social work. The page contains a video welcome message from the chair of the program's diversity committee, as well as diversity reports for the entire university, the social work program's 2009-2010 diversity plan report, guides for addressing diversity in the classroom and in the field, videos and slide shows to explore diverse historical and current events, and a podcast course on the history of oppression. In contrast, other program websites included little diversity in their picture content and little to no information regarding diverse student organizations. In addition, while all of the websites contained some information regarding program activities and events, several websites contained little information about events focused on diversity issues. The following sections outline the results of the analyses for diversity content in specific variables of interest.

#### Website Content

*Home pages.* Home pages of the 11 websites generally contained photos indicating ethnic and some student-age diversity, as well as key focus areas of the programs. They emphasized the programs' teaching, research, curricula, student opportunities and resources, global education, field education, and associated careers in social work. The programs' home pages contained links to additional information, including, in most cases, the programs' missions, visions, and goals.

*Missions, visions, and program values.* Nine of 11 program websites communicated their mission statements through the

webpages. In addition, one program communicated its values and two programs communicated their visions. The programs' missions included statements about such ideals as transforming systems that perpetuate poverty and social disadvantage, promoting deeper understandings of the causes and human costs of social inequities, transforming lives, promoting social and economic justice, enhancing human well-being, and eliminating complex social issues. Vision statements focused on commitments to improve the lives of individuals, families, and communities; create positive social change through excellence in research and education; strive to end discrimination, oppression, poverty, and other forms of social injustice; and enhance knowledge through the presence of cultural and ethnic diversity in classrooms. The programs also aimed to communicate these commitments through picture content on their websites.

*Picture content.* All 11 social work education programs in our sample included picture content of some type on their websites. Picture content represented racial/ethnic diversity, although two websites' photos included a majority of people who appeared to be White, European Americans. Photos generally depicted people from various age groups, while two programs included photos of people who predominantly appeared to be young. Gender diversity was present in pictures on all of the websites. Disability, gender identity and expression, and religious and sexual orientation diversity were not represented in pictures on the social work education programs' websites.

*Student organizations.* Nine of the 11 program websites provided details about student organizations. Generally, when mentioned, student organizations represented diverse issues. Age-related student organizations, including student organizations focused on issues for children and older adults, are listed on the websites of six of the program websites. Disability-focused student organizations were listed on five of the programs' websites and included organizations focused on recovery for addiction to drugs and alcohol, general disability issues, and disability awareness. On five program websites, student organizations focused on cultural and ethnic issues included African, American Indian, Asian, Pacific Islander, Korean, Latino, Pan-Asian, and general international and transnational student organizations. Gender identity-focused issues were represented in a student organization at one institution only and included two spirit and intersex students with the lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) student organization. Student organizations focused on immigration and political issues were represented on the websites of two and seven programs, respectively. Three programs have student organizations dedicated to veterans' issues. Race- and religion-focused student organizations were represented on eight of the nine websites detailing student organization information. Race-related student organizations included African American and Black student

organizations, one organization for students of color, an “anti-racism and white allyship” organization, and an organization at one program for students of multiple racial, ethnic, and cultural backgrounds; those in interracial/ethnic/cultural relationships; and transracial/national adoptees, as well as all others wishing to be involved in discussions about the intersections of identities. Religious student organizations included six Christian and three Jewish organizations. Five programs have student organizations focused on issues of sex, including three feminist organizations, two men’s organizations, and one “violence against women awareness” group. Sexual orientation–focused organizations were represented at six institutions that published student organization information. The programs’ websites contained similar results for diversity-focused activities and events.

*Program activities, symposia, and events.* All 11 of the websites contained information about program activities, symposia, and events that included issues of diversity. One website contained information about past events only and no future events. Nine programs detailed events focused on age diversity that included professional development seminars and lecture series on addressing issues with children and older adults.

Seven of the 11 programs held events focused on class issues. These included lectures and seminars on addressing poverty, including institutional and organizational perspectives of urban poverty, economic distress, and relationship qualities; developing economic capacity; and establishing financial freedom. One program has a poverty center that sponsors a poverty seminar series.

Disability issues were the focus of events listed on eight of the 11 program websites. These addressed issues of mental health and illness, cognitive disabilities, movement disorders, obesity, addictive disorders, co-occurring disorders, trauma and addiction, health disparities, dementia, and HIV issues. One program held an art show featuring the art of program participants of a social work program to increase awareness and understanding of mental health issues. Another held a toy repair workshop to adapt toys for use by children with disabilities.

Cultural events were highlighted on nine of the 11 programs’ websites. These included lectures on indigenous groups in Latin and North America, multicultural issues, and defining diversity. One program hosted a pow-wow, while another sponsored a symposium on the epidemic of African Americans in distress and another program sponsors an annual event focused on multiculturalism. Global immersion programs to Israel and Puerto Rico were the features of one program’s cultural events.

Three programs included information about events focused on gender issues and two included information about events on gender identity issues. Events on gender issues addressed the intersections of race and gender and gender equality in public policy. Events focused on gender identity

issues included content on transgender and gender-queer identity and assessment, interventions, and treatment for program participants with gender identity dysphoria.

Seven of the 11 programs featured information about events addressing immigration issues on their websites. Topics included immigration policy, migrant rights in an era of globalization, immigration reform, migration and health issues, immigrant parent involvement in American schools, issues for undocumented young adults, U.S. exploitation of migrant workers, and economic assimilation of foreign-born workers in the United States. Events addressing additional international issues were featured on six of the 11 programs’ websites and included lectures on social work, social welfare, and medicine in Asia, Switzerland, and Jordan; HIV risks and prevention in Brazil, Mongolia, and Kazakhstan; social development in India; and working for peace after conflicts.

Race and religion were the foci of events listed on five and three of the 11 programs’ websites, respectively, while sex and sexual orientation were the foci of events listed on five and four of the 11 programs’ websites, respectively. Race-focused events addressed intergroup relations with respect to race and immigration; race and ethnicity in American life; intergroup anxiety effects on minority and majority group members; the racial politics of poverty; minority underachievement in higher education; the impact of subprime lending on communities of color; the interactions between race, stress, social support, and mental health; and racism experienced by various groups of Americans. Religion-focused events included a Jewish communal leadership program, as well as lectures on Islam and social work, spirituality and end-of-life care, and liberation theology. Events regarding issues of sex included the impact of child-bearing on women’s wages, depression among female Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) recipients, female gangs in America, and responsible fatherhood and child support. Those focusing on sexual orientation addressed cultural competency in working with gay men, lesbian women, and bisexual and transgender men and women and addressing the needs of lesbian, gay, bisexual, and transgender (LGBT) elders.

*Field education.* Field education is the cornerstone of social work education. It is considered to be the most vital part of a social work student’s preparation to practice professional social work. Seven of the 11 programs made comprehensive field education documents available on their websites. One website required potential applicants to complete an online form to receive additional information about field education. Another website indicated that there was a link for information about the field education program, though no link existed.

Of those websites containing field education documents, only one program had documents available in formats other than PDF, and those formats were for Microsoft Word. None

of the documents were available in any format that is accessible to people who are blind. In addition, all the documents about field education were available only in English.

**Diversity of administrative structure.** Seven of the 11 deans of the top-rated social work programs are White: five men and two women. The other four are an African American man, an African American woman, and two Asian American women. The female deans represent greater diversity than the male deans: two Asian American females, one African American female, and one White female.

Social work program directors were designated on six of the 11 websites: three White women, one White man, one African American woman, and one Asian American woman. Nine of the 11 websites identified field education directors: five White women, two White men, one Asian American woman, and one African American man.

**Assessment.** The analysis also assessed the extent to which programs published their progress toward achievement of the EPAS standards, to understand how the program may identify diversity problems. Also assessed was whether programs made information available to students regarding the necessary procedures for reporting violations, concerns, or other matters related to the school's ability to ensure respect of and appreciation for diversity. Both considerations would inform how the program and/or potential student could address perceived diversity deficiencies. None of the institutions outlines any plan for assessment of their progress toward the EPAS standards. Seven programs' websites contain information for students to report violations or concerns regarding the program's respect of and appreciation for diversity. One of the programs has convened a group called the Bias Response Team. One program website requires admitted students to sign in for access to information for current students, so it is unclear whether there is information on the website for students to report violations, concerns, or other matters. Another program's website has a link for the University Complaint Investigation and Resolution Office, which specifies field complaints regarding hazing and sexual harassment.

## Discussion

The current research informs a number of issues important to the recruitment and retention of a diverse student body in social work education programs. While all of the programs whose websites were analyzed have achieved accreditation from CSWE for their statements of commitment to issues of diversity, their communication of these values to prospective students through their program websites is not inclusive of the full spectrum of diversity outlined in the EPAS document. This research provided an EPAS-guided, systematic review of various domains of the online experience to explore the ways in which social work programs communicate their

commitment to diversity. The current research also analyzed the respective faculty commitments to engagement in their communities, as well as their dissemination of information to the field on issues of diversity.

While many of the top-rated social work programs' websites included evidence of an abundance of opportunities for students to become involved in diversity-related student organizations and events, this was not the case for all of the websites. In addition, diversity issues do not appear to be addressed adequately in the programs' and websites' infrastructure. Many programs have information available only in English. Videos included on the websites did not have closed captioning for visitors who are deaf or hard of hearing. Information was not available in audio form for visitors to the websites who are blind or have difficulty seeing.

## Study Limitations

This study reviewed the websites of social work programs listed in the top 10 of U.S. News and World Report's "Best Social Work Programs" list of 2011; given the limited number of schools reviewed, it should not be considered representative of all social work programs.

The current study remains the only of its kind in social work; however, similar research exists (see Smith et al., 2016), illustrating the importance of this topic.

While websites are not the only source of information available to potential applicants regarding programs' credibility, they may be one that is known to a greater number of potential applicants. It should also be noted that students likely select their school based on a number of factors (i.e., tuition cost, location of school) outside the scope of the current study. Future studies that also collect information from potential applicants would add to the understanding of the relative importance of diversity inclusion in selecting a social work program. The study, however, did thoroughly review the content available on or through the websites to assess the extent to which the programs make information available to potential applicants. Some programs did not include some of the information sought for analysis, such as their missions and field education documents.

## Future Research and Practice Implications

The current research employed a guided review of program websites of the "Best Social Work Programs" (2011) top-10 ranked social work programs using the EPAS standards all accredited programs should be familiar with. As other comprehensive reviews of website content have also stated (Carter, Gezinski, & Karandikar-Chheda, 2012), future research should incorporate known behavioral patterns of consumers of this type of information to incorporate content areas that are likely to be actually viewed by the consumer. In addition, future research should include triangulation

techniques such as in-person visits, and materials reviews to create a more exhaustive inquiry. The research team's understanding of this literature is that far less webpage content is likely to be viewed by the average consumer. There should also be an emphasis on accounting for changes in the websites over time and including this information into analyses. This research was conducted during the summer, so some activities may not represent the diversity typically seen during the main part of the academic year. Finally, the review was of one aspect of the college search—the website presence. However, most consumers of higher education include various contact means and even campus visits to determine where they will pursue graduate studies. Future research should strive to include all of the salient factors in their analyses of the cultural climate.

Program websites are considered important to program recruitment efforts as students search for higher education institution information (Chapin & Fitzgerald, 2002). A review of the websites is one component of what is likely a holistic view of the level of diversity among the social work education programs. However, social work education programs should consider their website content and accessibility carefully to ensure access and visibility among those potential applicants with diverse backgrounds whom the programs hope to engage through their recruitment materials in the online environment.

### Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

### Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

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