

## **The movement of social work education online during a pandemic: Lessons learned**

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### **Abstract**

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*During the pandemic in the Winter of 2020, social work programs forced movement from onground to online teaching platforms for safety reasons. This study investigated social work faculty's perceptions of the forced movement to online teaching, including the challenges, resources, and lessons learned. Social media sites and a social work listserv were utilized to recruit participants. A total of 92 participants responded to an online survey that gathered their experiences moving content online and supporting sources. Results indicated that most elements of social work courses were not difficult for faculty to move online. Content that was perceived as more difficult to move online was group work and role-plays. Faculty also described sources of support as colleagues, department, and the university. Qualitative data collected from open-ended questions highlighted experiences of transitioning classes online that were outside of the actual content movement. The results highlighted the learning curve of technology, student engagement, university flexibility, and working at home. This study adds insight into the state of social work education during a pandemic.*

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### **Introduction**

In his early work on pedagogy and policy challenges in online education, Knowles (2007) proposed a key question on the theme of engaging social work faculty: "How will the majority of social work educators who are not yet involved in e-learning get from here to there?" (p. 27). This question is now obsolete after the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic in the Winter of 2020. Faculty engagement in online teaching was mandated by universities to prevent the spread of the virus. Thus, most social work courses were required to move to an online educational platform. While the resources to develop and teach online classes are plentiful, the shortened emergency timeline to move courses entirely online was likely difficult in many respects for the faculty, students, and universities. Therefore, this study focused on social work faculty's perceptions during the mass migration to online teaching at the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic in the Winter of 2020. Of particular interest were the perceived support, difficulties, and challenges faculty faced during the transition.

The literature on social work education has identified a recurring and significant issue in the growth and movement of on ground to online teaching. While advancements in online social work education continue to grow and flourish, faculty perceptions have not kept pace.

Despite showing effective comparisons to online versus onground teaching (Forgey & Ortega-Williams, 2018; Stauss, Koh, & Collie, 2018), social work faculty's perceptions of effectiveness have changed little over the years (Levin, Fulgintini, & Moore, 2018). Levin, Fulgintini, and Moore (2018) state that faculty perceptions in adopting online social work education are critical to understanding how to accomplish quality execution of online courses and programming. The impetus for online education during the 2020 pandemic became involuntary due to safety reasons. It is important to determine how social work education supported this movement and the development of effective online social work education.

Furthermore, as Farrel et al. (2018) stated, the discussion of online teaching will remain as to how faculty adapt and accommodate teaching methods online to preserve quality while addressing changing needs. In this case, the changing need refers to the online teaching environment's required movement to continue social work education during the pandemic crisis. The literature does not offer much comparison literature on any event that nationally impacted social work education in this manner. The one similar issue was after the 9/11 terrorist attacks when field instruction in New York City was impacted. Matthieu, Ivanoff, Lewes, and Conroy (2006) highlighted important decisions in student education need to be made during times of crisis; the students need to learn while remaining safe, which also applies to social work education during the COVID-19 pandemic.

Jones (2014) highlights the need to address the learning curve for both faculty and students in the movement to online courses. Darby (2020) suggests that content should be set up intuitively with units that build off each other and scaffold activities. Thus, course development and preparation are more than just moving an onground class to an online course. An onground course does not simply translate to a simple online setup with lectures, activities, links, videos, and assignments. With the fast movement to online teaching during the pandemic, social work educators were faced with the overwhelming necessity to move content online without the proper time needed to think through all the elements required for quality course development and delivery. Forced engagement in online teaching was essential to maintain safety and not interrupt the education of students. It equates to the adage "the show must go on." The purpose of the present study was to collect the social work faculty's perceptions of the forced movement to online teaching, including the challenges, resources, and lessons learned. By collecting and disseminating this information, challenges can be addressed and opportunities for growth identified.

## Methods

The study aimed to collect data regarding the comfort level moving course activities online, perceived support, desires, and challenges faced during the Coronavirus pandemic's onset in the Winter of 2021. This research was approved by the Capella IRB, protocol #2020-412.

## Protocol and measurements

This study employed a web-based survey to collect perceptions of social work challenges and opportunities in the online teaching movement during the Spring 2020 academic terms. The survey was distributed to potential participants via a link on the Baccalaureate Program Directors (BPD) listserv and two social media sites, Social Work Engagement in Research and Learning (SWERL) and Early Career Social Work Educators. Permission was secured from each of these outlets before posting. The link was also posted on an author's personal social media site. The information about the survey and link was posted to these sites in mid-April 2020.

A survey was developed to capture demographic information and the number of courses taught, level of teaching (BSW, MSW, Ph.D./DSW), number of years teaching, rank, and average course size. The remainder of the survey questions focused on the experiences of moving to online teaching. Questions pertained to how much online teaching and course development the participants had prior to the online teaching movement during the Pandemic. Participants were also asked to rate sources of support in moving to online teaching. The rating scale was 1-4 and was identified as: *No support at all, A little bit of support, A moderate amount of support, A lot of support*. Participants were also asked to rate how difficult it was to move categories of teaching to an online platform on a scale of 1-4. The ratings were identified as: *Not difficult at all, A little difficult, A moderately difficult, Very difficult*. The categories to rate included: *Lectures, Assigned Readings, Assigned papers, Group assignments, Methods (e.g., role plays), Field seminar, Tests/quizzes, Discussions, Videos, Student presentations*. Two questions asked participants about departmental perceptions in moving classes online. The first question asked participants to list three ways their department supported them in moving online. Another question asked them to list three ways they wished their department had supported them in moving courses online.

An additional open-ended question asked participants to list three challenges they faced when moving online courses during the Pandemic. Lastly, participants could share anything else about the movement to online teaching that they thought would be pertinent to share with the researchers.

Before participants could initiate the survey, they were provided information on consent. By clicking on the link, participants indicated consent. The first page of the survey was the inclusion criteria. To move to the next page of the survey, participants had to check that they taught social work at a university and moved at least one social work class online during the Pandemic. Once the survey started, the first question was: *How many courses did you have to move online due to COVID-19 pandemic?* If participants checked *none* or *all of my courses were already being taught online*, they were directed out of the survey.

### **Sample**

The sample was purposive in nature. The survey was distributed to potential participants via a link on the Baccalaureate Program Directors (BPD) listserv as well as two social media sites, Social Work Engagement in Research and Learning (SWERL) and Early Career Social Work Educators. Snowball sampling was also utilized as participants were asked to share the link with other social work faculty.

The recruitment resulted in 92 usable surveys consisting of 75 females (81.5%), 16 males (17.4%) and one transgendered individual. Additionally, 51 participants (55.4%) worked at a public university and the rest reported working for a private university (n=41, 44.6%). Most of the sample held the rank of assistant professor (n=31, 33.7%) and most were assigned to a BSW program (n=74, 80.4%).

### **Data Analysis**

In terms of data analysis, we wanted to demonstrate the most common levels of difficulty our participants experienced moving activities online. We also wanted to describe the most frequently reported level of perceived support from the different systems faculty interact with regularly. Therefore, IBM's statistical package, SPSS 24 was used to identify the modes, or the most chosen response. The responses to the open-ended question were analyzed using open coding. Open coding refers to breaking apart the data and organizing the pieces into codes or categories (Corbin & Strauss, 2008). To accomplish this, the authors used Microsoft Excel to organize and code the participants' responses. Specifically, the second author created a worksheet for each open-ended question. Then he placed each of the participant's individual responses in their own cell within Column A. Next, the responses were read and assigned a code which was placed in Column B. To achieve inter-rater reliability, the first author reviewed the Excel file who agreed with the codes.

### **Results**

Prior to the onset of the Coronavirus pandemic of 2020, it appears that participants had experience teaching on ground (n=43, 46.7%), while 56 out of the 92 respondents (60.9%) indicated they had a little experience (0-5 courses) teaching online. Furthermore, 66 (71.7%) reported having very little experience developing courses for online delivery. Finally, due to the pandemic, 44 (47.8%) had to move between 1-2 classes, 38 (41.3%) moved 3-4 classes, and 10 (10.9%) had to move more than 4 classes online.

### **Challenges**

The survey had several questions about how difficult moving lectures, assigned readings, assigned papers, group assignments, role plays, discussions, test/quizzes, videos, and student presentations. Study participants were asked to choose from the following difficulty levels: *Not difficult at all*, *a little difficult*, *moderately difficult*, and *extremely difficult*. There was also an option to indicate whether the participant had already had the item online or did not need it. Table 1 provides the mode of each activity.

Table 1: Difficulty level of moving content online

Activity	Difficulty Level, n, % of 92	n and % of 92 for Did Not Use Them/ Already online
Lectures	A little difficult, n=34, 37%	n=8, 9%
Assigned Readings	Not difficult at all, n=60, 65%	n=16, 17.4%
Assigned Papers	Not difficult at all, n=53, 58%	n=14, 15%
Group Assignments	A little difficult, n=25, 27%/Moderately difficult n=23, 25%	n=22, 24%
Role Plays	A little difficult, n=14, 15%/Extremely difficult, n=16, 17%	n=49, 53%
Discussions	Not difficult at all, n=43, 47%	n=7, 8%
Test/Quizzes	Not difficult at all, n=35, 38%	n=26, 28%
Videos	Not difficult at all, n=46, 50%	n=20, 22%
Student Presentations	A little difficult, n=32, 35%	n=17, 19%

Table 1 indicates that most activities presented *little to no difficulty* for most of the participants. It did appear that migrating group assignments were *moderately difficult* for 25% (n=23) of the participants. Also, role plays appeared to be the most challenging as it was the only activity that had a mode of *extremely difficult*, which was the most extreme choice on the Likert scale. Finally, it appeared that there was some variation in terms of whether an activity was either already online or not one used by our participants. For example, while role plays were the most difficult activity to migrate, it was also the activity that was either not used or already incorporated as an online activity. Unfortunately, we did not ask our question to allow us to provide individual accounts in terms of whether an activity already existed or was not used by the respondent.

Our participants were also given the opportunity to share the challenges they faced during this forced migration to online education delivery. First, participants found **course adjustments** to be challenging. This was especially true for group assignments as indicated in the following the statement

*Two major projects were group presentation at the end of the semester. It was challenging in the sense that not all students responded the same to the online switch (some didn't have internet access, some just dropped off the radar), so groups became frustrated with each other. Also, just the logistics of putting a group presentation online was a nightmare.*

Another challenge faculty faced was **access**, whether internet access was for themselves and their students, software to deliver course content (one participant stated that they had to purchase their own license for Zoom) or course materials as noted by the following statement

*one of my major assignments requires watching a movie and writing and analysis and case plan - the movie is owned by our library and is not available to stream online. Our library contacted the producer asking for temporary permission to view online but they never responded.*

**Program has limited comprehension of faculty difficulties** was another challenge faced. This was usually in terms of no childcare and the burden of being at home and balancing young children and their academic responsibilities. The lack of awareness is demonstrated by the following quote "*recognizing that the married couple in our department who have no young children will of course be able to be more productive than me, the single mother who has not child care now*" Also, the **learning curve for course migration** was also a challenge for our participants. They felt challenged having to learn different software and ways for delivering content and managing their courses. One participant summed up this challenge by stating "*One of the 4 courses this semester is an online course, my first, from which I was supposed to learn the process. Suddenly, 4 courses!!!!*".

**Time** was yet another challenge. The migration seemed to create additional work for which additional time was needed. For example, "*Time spent was much more than when doing F2F teaching*" was one of the responses provided. Participants also felt challenged by the turnaround time needed to get courses online. "*I was running against the clock--it was too much too fast, and I felt very overwhelmed*" someone stated. **Keeping students engaged and present** was also seen as a challenge.

Participants reported a general lack of motivation and engagement in their responses, some of which they admitted was due to students' work schedules or other "*extenuating circumstances (homelessness, internet access, etc.)*".

A final challenge that emerged was **fluctuations in mental health and stress levels due to all the changes brought on by the pandemic**. Our participants commented on their own mental health challenges in statements such as "*My overall trauma response/emotional exhaustion due to Covid*", "*Coping personally with the pandemic*" and "*Just getting my head around the whole thing*". Participants appeared concerned about the additional stress and anxiety the migration to online delivery had on their students. One participant summed it up by stating "*students who had never taken an online course and were fearful and hesitant to engage online*" while another one noticed that "*mental health of students was poor for first 4 weeks*".

### Supportive Resources and Identified Needs

Participants were also asked to rate their level of perceived support provided by several systems during the forced migration. These systems included colleagues, their department, the university, publishers, listservs, and social media sites. Each system was rated using a five-point Likert scale with *no support at all*, *a little bit of support*, *a moderate amount of support*, and *a lot of support*. Table 2 describes the mode level of support for each system.

Table 2: Perceived Level of Support

System	Perceived Level of Support, n, % of 92	n and % of 92 of those who reported no support at all
Colleagues	A lot of support, n=40, 44%	n=6, 7%
Department	A lot of support, n=42, 46%	n=6, 7%
University	A lot of support, n=42, 46%	n=2, 2%
Publishers	A moderate amount of support, n=33, 36%	n=20, 22%
Listsers	A moderate amount of support, n=30, 33%	n=15, 16%
Social Media Sites	A little bit of support, n=32, 35%	n=29, 32%

Table 2 demonstrates what appears to be a great deal of support from colleagues, the department, and the university. This can be confirmed not only by the mode of *a lot of support*, but also the low numbers of participants that felt no support at all for these three systems. Interesting, the level of support dips when considering publishers, listservs, and social media while the number of participants who reported not receiving support from these systems increases. This could be a function of whom the participant interacted with. For example, it is possible that they went to a colleague or their department for support rather than posing a question to a listserv or social media site or relying on the publisher to help migrate the course content to an online format.

### Support

In addition to indicating levels of support, participants were asked to describe how they felt supported by their department. This resulted in several emergent themes. The first theme was the **flexibility** of their department. Examples of flexibility included choices between asynchronous and synchronous delivery, freedom to develop the courses as the participant saw fit and allowing the participant to take home the technology needed for course delivery. The second theme to emerge was **goodwill nature** of their department during the Coronavirus pandemic. Participants indicated that they felt supported by the fact that their department would have regular check-in with them. For example, one participant stated that the department showed "*genuine expressions of concern for our well-being and the well-being of the students*" while another one stated the department "*listening to me when I needed to speak with someone about a course*". Peer support was yet another way that the department's goodwill nature came to life. Participants made note of how their peers were instrumental in listening to them, sharing the workload, or just providing general support. An example of how peer support was used came from one participant who said, "*coworkers shared workload--one wrote the lectures, one recorded them, one made all exams/assignments/syllabi*". Peer support was also demonstrated in the fact that participants with less experience teaching online were paired with more experienced faculty, supported by this type of quote "*encouraging faculty experienced in online teaching to help those who were not*".

A third theme that emerged was **providing a sense of community** whether that was through “stay in touch meetings” like maintaining regular faculty meetings through technologies like Zoom or Google or “*having weekly progress and brainstorming meetings*” or the sharing of ideas like “*sharing what works and what doesn't*” or “*My department helped me brainstorm alternative assignments for students in field placement*”. A fourth theme that emerged was the **provision of resources**. Participants felt supporting whether the resource provision was related to dissemination of information (“*Keeping me informed about changes at the departmental, college, university and state levels*” or “*passing along emails regarding field practicum and changes being implemented by CSWE*”), providing trainings (“*Provided examples on how to transition*” or “*sending links to various resources for online teaching*”), technical support (“*offering specific help when needed (how to post videos, etc.)*” or “*providing specific tech person to provide support if needed*”), technology equipment (“*making equipment available at home*” or “*making sure I had needed equipment*”), instructional design support (“*holding a dept meeting with the university instructional design specialist so he could demonstrate new tech and best practices*”), and additional time (“*Giving us time to get our courses set up*” or “*Giving me 2 weeks lead time to get my course up and running*”).

A final theme that emerged when examining how participants felt supported by their department’s ability to **reconsider expectations**. For example, one participant reported being afforded “*the autonomy to adjust my course requirements*” while in a similar vein another participant was encouraged to “*decrease our expectations of students*”. One participant even reported a reconsideration regarding how student evaluations were counted. Specifically, they stated they felt supported by their department in the fact that they were “*not counting student evaluations towards contract renewal this semester*”.

### **Identified Needs**

Participants also identified supportive needs. Participants expressed a desire for **increased communication**, whether it was the need for check-ins (“*actually checking in with the progress and comfort level*”, “*having video conferences to touch base 'face to face'*” or “*sending an uplifting email once a week*”) or a desire for better information dissemination such as “*Providing a lot more communication to students about what's going on and expectations*”, “*providing more examples of how this is done in other places*” or “*Clearly communicated the required changes and deadlines*”. Participants also stated needs to make the transition to online teaching a smoother more supported endeavor.

**Reconsiderations of faculty expectations** were seen as an identified need for participants. For example, statements like “*eliminating service and scholarship requirement for tenure*”, “*decrease the number of times I met with the students via zoom*” or “*saying we could drop assignments*” were demonstrative of the theme of **reconsider expectations**. Our participants also expressed a need for **more support across systems** whether it was sharing best practices (“*Creating small work groups by course or content area to discuss pedagogical strategies*”), more time (“*advocating for more than 3 days to transition*”), technology support (“*clearly advocating for resources - I am using my personal laptop, have no printer or scanner at home and no tech support*”), workload assistance (“*providing a T.A. to assist getting some of the techie work done while I concentrate and the meat of my job*”) and the sharing of ideas and best practices (“*Creating small work groups by course or content area to discuss pedagogical strategies*”).

The participants also expressed the need for **better organization** by their departments and universities particularly around the need for more standardization during the pandemic. For example, one participant stated, “*had us all be uniform in some ways on some things - work from a base*” while another one said, “*Coordinating all classes with the department for expectations around grades/grading*”. Perhaps one of the most interesting needs was an **increased sensitivity** by their department. This theme is perhaps best summed up by the following two statements with the first being “*Acknowledge that for those of us with kids at home--I have three--this is an impossible situation. STOP GIVING MORE AND EXTRA WORK*” while the second was just as explicit when they said “*recognizing that the married couple in our department who have no young children will of course be able to be more productive than me, the single mother who has not child care now*”.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

While noting the impact of time, access, and a learning curve, a primary finding of this study was that overall, faculty reported an efficient movement of course elements to an online platform. Burke (2020) states that “*Instructional design and technology administrators have emphasized that temporarily moving in-person classes to remote learning is different from designing and developing a course that is completely online*” (para. 29).

Thus, it may not have been complicated for faculty to merely put content online versus developing and designing fully online courses.

Faculty in the present study also suggested a learning curve along with many themes such as access to technology, awareness of the different type of workload and teaching environment (working at home), challenges of keeping students engaged, and fluctuations in mental health and stress levels due to all the changes brought on by the pandemic. Access to computers might not be an issue for professors. However, professors still might struggle with different types of technologies that they are unfamiliar with and design their online learning environment (McMurtrie, 2020). Also, faculty might have to address issues surrounding students that struggle with access to internet services. Before the pandemic, one large study cited that almost 20% of students had technology issues (Gonzalez, Calaraco, & Lynch, 2018). Furthermore, the pandemic likely increased the digital divide among lower socioeconomic students (Reston, 2020). Issues surrounding technology are minimized when students can meet in the classroom for live instruction and have access to the computer labs on campuses. Some colleges addressed internet access during the pandemic by having WIFI available in certain parking lots even though buildings were closed (e.g., University of Iowa, <https://its.uiowa.edu/support/article/118316> ). However, if students lived far from campus, then they still may have struggled with access.

Faculty in this study noted opportunities for growth and improvement in online teaching, such as developing a sense of community and students' engagement. Cary (2020) states that just teaching online is more than just giving professors the technology and that it requires a substantial amount of work to teach online and engage students. The importance of connection and engagement is highlighted in a review study of 47 articles covering online teaching theories, practices, and assessments. Sun and Chen (2016) highlighted that developing a sense of community is a significant component in online teaching. Both professors and learners need to collaborate in these efforts for effective online learning. Engagement takes preplanning in the design of the course and familiarity with different engagement tools and techniques. It is unlikely that faculty in this study had time to plan engagement strategies when the courses were quickly moved online mid-semester. In summary, a good online class is easier said than done.

Faculty support from the administration and peers was another area of significance in this study that parallels the literature. Burke (2020) outlines that in the movement to online classes, the administration has provided flexibility to faculty and independence to move the different online classes, reinforcing no one-size-fits-all methodology. Furthermore, she states that universities have provided guidance for online teaching techniques to use during the pandemic. She also notes that faculty have been supporting their peers with this guidance as well. However, faculty did express that there is room for growth for administrators to be more flexible in supporting tenure and personal work circumstances (working from home).

### **Implications and Conclusion**

Technology can facilitate education, but our participants indicated insufficient time to provide quality education. Sacrifices were made for both the faculty and the learner, creating some concern about quality given the quick turnaround. In other words, time to prep, time to figure out how things work, time to deliver, and time to interact is essential for quality delivery. It was evident that support is necessary when the world has been shaken by a pandemic or any other ongoing crisis. Faculty need to feel support from their department leaders, from their friends, students, and universities. Without such support, morale becomes an issue. Such support also includes accommodations for life outside of the campus. This includes support for technology and teaching. More importantly, it includes supporting faculty mental and physical health. This pandemic brought on enormous changes; we were isolated and forced to carry on from home. This shift saw us become full-time caregivers to the young and old while balancing a full workload and a switch to a technology-driven platform. Support is of the essence.

Finally, faculty need to feel validated. For some faculty, this was their first time in an online environment; it was the first time to try new activities for the more seasoned. Overall, faculty want validation for their efforts, especially during a forced migration, which resulted in a rapid turnaround from the ground to online education.

### **Limitations**

This study was not without limitations. The use of convenient sampling limits our ability to say how representative our findings are. This does limit generalizability. However, the use of survey research was intended to provide a quick snapshot of the state of social work education during a time of crisis.

Despite the limitations, it seemed the study showed that the old saying of the “show must go on” rang true for the social work faculty during the forced migration to online education.

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