

Supporting social work students through a change: a support group intervention at Monmouth University

Authors: Hunter Drivanos and Caitlin McErlean
Monmouth University: Department of Social Work

Abstract

As both the field of social work and the broader societal landscape undergo rapid and continuous change, students preparing to enter the profession may experience heightened uncertainty, vulnerability, and overwhelmed while trying to strive to meet the demands as becoming a social worker. This can lead to mental health issues and even burnout as a student and a future social worker. In hopes of addressing this for students at Monmouth University, we facilitated a group check in for students' feelings and thoughts during this time. This program aims to provide guidance on navigating the academic realm and world outside campus, creating meaningful connections within the program, and, most importantly, promote mental health awareness.



Introduction

The social work profession and the surrounding social, political, and economic environments are changing at a fast pace, generating new expectations and multifaceted challenges for those preparing to enter the field. As a result of these global changes social worker students often feel uncertain, overwhelmed, and emotionally vulnerable while balancing academic, personal, and internships. With these pressures it can often lead to mental health concerns and burnout before even entering the field.



Methodology

The facilitators created a two-session support group for all underclassmen attending Monmouth University, majoring or minoring in Social work. The first session was held on December 3rd, which landed at the end of the semester. The second session was on January 28th, which landed a week after the semester started. This allowed the facilitators to be able to see how the end of the semester affected students versus the beginning of the semester.

At the start of each session, the facilitators created an activity for the participants to "break the ice" for the group and create a bonding experience. The activity in the beginning of the first session, the facilitators created a step-in-circle. The facilitators created questions, and if the participants related to them, they would step in. The activity at the beginning of the second session was a four corners activity. Again, the facilitators would ask questions with 4 options. Depending on the answer a participant had, would mean they would go to a certain corner. Both events allowed the facilitators to learn about the participants and where they stand in school and emotionally. It also allowed all of the participants to learn about their peers and see the similarities in one another, creating a bond.



After the activities, the facilitators would ask if there was anything the group members wanted to discuss based on the activity or in general. The facilitators also had discussion topics available but allowed the group to carry the conversation as needed.

At the end of each session, the facilitators gave the option for the group members to share anything as needed and asked if they were feeling after the session and if they needed anything and asked for their feedback on the group. This allowed the facilitators to gain an understanding of what worked, what didn't, and what was needed for possible future groups.



Results

Through both group sessions, there were many findings on the students' needs and wants based on the things that are affecting their mental health.

Some aspects of their time at Monmouth and in the world that are affecting their mental health include their classes, their practicum (internship), the human rights climate, personal life issues, etc. Another finding was on their coping mechanisms and where they find support.

Findings on Class load:

Underclassmen found that they are not stressed about class load or stress in classes. Seniors expressed feeling stressed about class load and time management. Specific worries were about the Research class and the grant writing class.



Findings on thoughts on Practicum (Internship):

Juniors searching for an internship expressed feeling stressed about finding one in time for the next semester. Both seniors and juniors expressed feelings of stress about meeting their required hours for their internship due to factors including courses, weather, work, family matters, etc.

Findings on Stress/uncertainty for the future:

When doing the four corners activity, it was found that the majority of the group felt uncertain about entering the social work world after graduation. Seniors shared feelings of stress about applications to graduate school and finding an internship for the next year.

Findings on what affects the condition of our country have on them:

In the second group, the political environment status was discussed. Students stated that they felt stressed and unproductive in change. They also stated they felt bad for being privileged while people are struggling in the world. Students found that protesting or being involved helped with feeling stressed and unproductive. This seemed to help others.

Findings on what students are struggling with the most:

Students stated that they were struggling with time management and stress with class load, internship hours, and having a work/class/ life balance. Another finding in the four corners activity is that the majority of the group struggled with not feeling productive enough.

Findings on Coping Mechanisms and Support Systems:

Students stated that they have coping mechanisms, but do not actively use them when needed. Some stated they do not know what they need when feeling stressed or sad. Within the group, members worked together to create strategies and ideas. The group also discussed leaning on peers for support. The group allowed this for the participants who would not have this if they had not attended.

Student Feedback

Student feedback indicated a strong interest in continuing the support group to a monthly basis, as it provides students with a consistency opportunity to manage stress with classmates. Students shared that the group offered them to process challenges experiences in their internships, and a feeling of support through the transitioning periods in the program. The diversity of class years within the group was viewed as a major strength, as it created space for peer-to-peer encouragement, shared insight, and mentorship across grades. This support group helped students build a stronger community with int social work program and form meaningful connections with classmates they may not interact with.



Recommendations

Based on student input, several recommendations emerged to strengthen this support group in the future. The key recommendations were to increase participants and accessibility. Offering an online group would allow students with busy schedule be able to participate more easily. Increasing advertisement through flyers, emails, and social media would help raise awareness and normalize mental health support. Students also expressed interesting in having snacks so it can create a more welcoming environment. Lastly, having professors inform students directly about the support group.



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