

# Responding to Crisis “That’s What We Do”- Social Workers in Action

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## ABSTRACT

Professional social workers are regularly front-line workers in society when there is a crisis. Their daily work frequently involves community-based intervention that places them in the communities they serve. These communities, often communities of color, are the most vulnerable and marginalized communities in our nation. This research explores the innovative techniques employed by faculty and students of the Social Work Program at the University of the District of Columbia and focuses on how the author used the “crisis outside the classroom, COVID-19” to address and avoid a crisis in the classroom. When the “world shut down” the social work program and its students sprang into action to assist the communities they serve, and to provide gaps in equity often experienced by black and brown communities.

**Keywords:** social work education, marginalized communities pandemic

## 1 Introduction

March 13th, 2020 – I remember hearing a news account that a basketball game was to be canceled because one of the players tested positive for “the new virus” that scientists and physicians were trying to understand and stop. The country was placed on high alert as it grappled with a worldwide pandemic that reached the shores of the United States and began to creep into and spread throughout communities in every state. Institutions of higher education maneuvered to ensure that universities and colleges were able to continue serving students while not losing valuable efforts and time already expended during the 2019-2020 academic year.

The University of the District of Columbia swiftly responded to the needs of the institution by informing professional and support staff about what was necessary to maintain academic excellence and student support for the students at the university. The university switched to emergency remote learning which included training professors on how to teach classes online. As a social work professor, I began to think, “What does this mean regarding how I teach and interact with my students”? I had already received my certificate in online teaching, but this was going to be different. I needed to explore new ways to enhance the learning environment in a way that would meet the needs of a diverse student body using a technology-based format. This new environment was different from the socially engaged and interactive live classrooms in which social work students and professors thrive.

As a Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion consultant, I am keenly aware of the importance of “leveling the playing field”, self-awareness, and empowerment. If I was to be successful in meeting my students’ needs and ensuring their success and achievement, I had to change



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what I did in the traditional classroom to meet the challenges and new reality of teaching in the virtual sphere. The diversity and equity issues that many of my students experienced were the focus of my attention. Studying at home proved challenging for several students. Many students experienced issues related to technology support in their homes. While other students found it difficult to study at home as living spaces did not afford them designated and or suitable spaces to study. Additionally, some students needed to purchase a computer for home use, because there was only one computer in the home and several people living in the home needed the use of a computer for virtual learning. The university was able to supply several computers for students in need. It is important to mention that several students are front-line workers and were required to work outside of the home in jobs, such as nursing, retail, and grocery, which placed them at risk of exposure to COVID-19. The need to work in a "high risk" added extra stress for some students.

Professional social workers are trained to respond and act in crisis situations. "Social workers have a long-standing history of serving others during the crisis impact phase" (Cacciatore, Carlson, Michaelis, Klimek, & Steffan, S., 2011, p. 82). Furthermore, the National Association of Social Work (NASW) code of ethics suggests that the primary mission of the social work profession is, "to enhance human well-being and help meet the basic human needs of all people, with particular attention to the needs and empowerment" (NASW Code of Ethics, 2015). A day in the life of a professional social worker often involves work outside of an office and in the community. We serve the most vulnerable communities, which include communities of color. We know what inequity looks like, we see what inequity looks like, and sometimes we experience inequity ourselves. Many of the populations served are marginalized concerning health, education, housing, and economics. Marginalized populations and communities lack quality services in each of these areas. Subsequently, those who are served by social workers often experience intersectionality of these inequities which significantly compounds the severity of their living situations.

My professional social work expertise and that of my colleagues proved to be an asset in response to the drastic change in the university experience as we knew it. As the university switched to emergency remote learning and online instruction, the social work program rolled up our sleeves and moved into action. We began examining the inequities that were more exposed during the early stages of the COVID-19 crisis and assessed approaches to address the problems.

This study explores and discusses the innovative techniques employed by faculty and students of the Social Work Program at UDC, focusing on how the author used the "crisis outside the classroom COVID-19" to address and avoid a crisis in the classroom. When the "world shut down" the social work program and its students sprang into action to assist the communities they serve and to provide gaps in equity often experienced by Black and Brown communities. We began examining the inequities which were more exposed during the early stages of the COVID-19 crisis and assessed approaches to address the problems.

The University of the District of Columbia's Bachelor of Social Work (BSW) program curriculum requires community-based learning. In addition to field practicum, students engage in advocacy projects throughout the District of Columbia. When the COVID-19 crisis began,

students who had already commenced their community involvement had to pivot and change how they engaged with the community. Community involvement and advocacy projects are hallmarks of the social work program. The program serves a diverse student population and diverse communities within the city. Many social work students live in the same communities they serve. Therefore, community involvement is community investment and self-preservation.

Our planned approach was to, 1) maintain UDC Social Work program objectives and Counsel on Social Work Education (CSWE) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS); 2) assess students' reactions to the global pandemic and respond accordingly using academic advisory and mentoring skills; and 3) evaluate what teaching methods appeared to generate interactive online communities. Using discussions and concerns students brought to the classroom, professors continually modified their classroom pedagogy to safeguard students' academic achievement and assist students with psychosocial issues.

The following is a description of the quick and effective strategies employed by the social work faculty to maintain student success during the COVID crisis.

## **2 Methodology**

This exploratory research is designed to evaluate the effectiveness of the Social Work Program's response to the COVID-19 crisis. The study will use mixed-methodology procedures. Data will be collected via survey questionnaires and face-to-face interviews. Survey questionnaires will be collected from social work students and professors. A random sample of interviews will be conducted using students and professors. This will be a small sample size as the study is limited to the current students enrolled in the BSW program and the professor who teaches in the program. As the researcher, I plan to explore options of available evidence-based surveys which measure stress in response to crises. The survey will provide the researcher with measurable data regarding student stress responses to COVID-19, while the qualitative data obtained via face-to-face interviews will provide the researcher with rich and deep information that cannot be garnered using quantitative methods. "Padgett (1998) suggests the use of the qualitative methodology in circumstances in which the research objective includes: the quest for a topic about which little is known, the pursuit of sensitive or emotional information, and or the desire to capture the real-life experience of people to make meaning of the experience" (Sechrest-Ehrhardt, 2012, p. 12).

A literature review of current scholarly articles reading the COVID-19 Global Pandemic, environmental stressors, academic support, and virtual classrooms will be conducted to guide and support the research study. A portion of the selected articles for the literature review is listed in the references.

There are ethical considerations that must be considered when conducting qualitative research involving human subjects. Padgett (2004) suggests, that ethical issues and dilemmas are often present throughout qualitative studies and may pose distress or discomfort for the researcher. The ethical considerations for this study include informed consent, confidentiality, emotional stress, and a vulnerable population. For the reasons mentioned, the researcher will apply to the University's Internal Review Board (IRB) before the start of the investigation.

### **3 Results**

This research has yet to occur; therefore results of the data are not available at the time of this publication. Data management and analysis will include appropriate calculations of survey results and the use of the latest version of *Atlas. ti* qualitative software package to analyze the interviews. Research results will be reported in an article to be submitted to the Journal of Social Work Education upon the completion of the study.

### **4 Conclusions**

The researcher is optimistic that the findings of this study will provide social work educators, clinical practitioners, and other healthcare professionals with valuable information regarding the skills, competencies, and diverse roles of professional social workers, especially regarding their expertise and leadership in helping those in need during significant crises such as COVID-19. Additionally, the researcher is confident that the actions employed by the UDC Social Work Program faculty can serve as a prototype and guide for other social work programs in the country.

### **5 Declarations**

#### **5.1 Competing Interests**

The author certifies that they have NO affiliations with or involvement in any organization or entity with any financial interest (such as honoraria; educational grants; participation in speakers' bureau's membership, employment, consultancies, stock ownership, or other equity interest; and expert testimony or patent-licensing arrangements), or non-financial interest (such as personal or professional relationships, affiliations, knowledge or beliefs) in the subject matter or materials discussed in this manuscript.

#### **5.2 Publisher's Note**

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