



Educational Pathways to Graduate-level Behavioral Health Degree Programs

Todd Jensen, PhD, MSW; Lisa de Saxe Zerden, PhD, MSW; Brianna Lombardi, PhD, MSW

Background

To address the behavioral health (BH) workforce crisis occurring in the United States (U.S.), supporting students' interest in the BH professions is urgent and national efforts to increase the diversity of the BH workforce (SAMHSA, 2020) require further exploration. Understanding educational pathways into the BH profession is important because it helps identify the future workforce, specifically who is entering the workforce, which professions are being produced, what specialties are being selected, and which populations are being served (Pittman et al., 2021). Thus, ongoing empirical exploration of the possible educational pathways into the BH workforce can (a) highlight opportunities to expand the number of adequately trained, culturally and linguistically representative BH providers (Buche et al., 2017; Page et al., 2017) and (b) assess whether disparate pathways yield comparable employment experiences (e.g., annual salary, job satisfaction, work setting).

Research Questions

This study addressed the following research questions: 1) What are the varying educational pathways by which individuals become full-time, graduate-level BH professionals? 2) To what extent are distinct educational pathways associated with individual sociodemographic and employment characteristics?

Methods

This study used publicly available, nationally representative data from the 2021 National Survey of College Graduates (NSCG). The analytic sample comprised 1,858 participants who possessed a graduate degree and indicated being employed full time in a principal job related to behavioral health (representative of a subpopulation of 847,095 individuals). Latent class analysis was employed to identify distinct patterns with respect to the attainment of an associate degree, undergraduate field of study, and graduate field of study. After selecting the optimal latent-class solution, weighted bivariate analyses were conducted to assess latent-class differences with respect to sociodemographic characteristics, educational institution characteristics, principal job characteristics, and student loan information. Racial/ethnic variability within identified latent classes also was assessed with respect to annual salary, job satisfaction, and student loan information.

Key Findings

Results from latent class analysis favored a four-class solution, which featured four educational patterns. Class 1, labeled social work, included 11% of the analytic sample. Individuals in this class possessed a 40% conditional probability of obtaining an associate degree, a 100% conditional probability of completing an undergraduate degree in social work, and a 100% conditional probability of obtaining a master of social work (MSW) degree.

Class 2, labeled psychology foundation and non-social work graduate degree, included 36% of the analytic sample (the largest of the four classes). Individuals in this class possessed a 21% conditional probability of obtaining an associate degree and a 100% conditional probability of completing an undergraduate degree in psychology. At the graduate level, conditional probabilities for fields of study varied notably, but none completed a graduate degree in social work. Instead, a master's degree in counseling psychology (29% conditional probability) and a master's degree in school counseling (13%) were most prominent.

Class 3, labeled non-social work foundation and social work graduate degree, included 23% of the analytic sample. Individuals in this class possessed a 12% conditional probability of obtaining an associate degree and a 100% conditional probability of obtaining a MSW degree. At the undergraduate level, most prominent were degrees in psychology (47% conditional probability), arts/humanities (18%), and sociology (14%).

Class 4, labeled non-psychology foundation and non-social work graduate degree, included the remaining 30% of the analytic sample. Individuals in this class possessed a 19% conditional probability of obtaining an associate degree. No one in this class possessed an undergraduate degree in psychology or a graduate degree in social work. At the undergraduate level, the most prominent were degrees in other social sciences (22% conditional probability), arts/humanities (21%), education (11%), STEM (11%), and sociology (10%). At the graduate level, most prominent were a master in school counseling (20% conditional probability), a master in counseling psychology (14%), a master in education (12%), and a master in some other social science (12%).

The educational pathways possessed notable similarities in terms of gender identity (between 75-84% across pathways), average salary (between \$64,669 to \$68,796 across pathways), and job satisfaction (between 85-92% "somewhat/very satisfied" across pathways). In terms of racial/ethnic identity differences across classes, respondents identifying as NH Black were over-represented in the non-psychology foundation and non-social work graduate degree class, whereas respondents identifying as NH White were over-represented in the social work and psychology foundation and non-social work graduate degree classes. Respondents identifying as Hispanic were under-represented in the social work class. Relative to their counterparts in the other three classes, respondents in the social work class also yielded the highest average age at both undergraduate (30.6 years) and graduate degree completion (34.8 years). Respondents in this class also yielded the shortest average duration between degrees (i.e., 4.3 years versus between 6.2 and 7.8 years in the remaining classes).

The most notable and significant difference between classes related to graduate loan amount still owed at the time of survey completion. Specifically, 32% of respondents in the psychology foundation and non-social work graduate degree class and 32% of respondents in non-psychology foundation and non-social work graduate degree class possessed \$40,001 or more of outstanding graduate student loans. In comparison, 24% of respondents in the non-social work foundation and social work graduate degree class and 15% of respondents in the social work class possessed \$40,001 or more in outstanding graduate student loans.

Assessments of within-class racial/ethnic variability highlighted disparities across all four educational pathways, generally showing lower annual salaries and higher levels of both undergraduate and graduate student loan burden for non-Hispanic Black and Hispanic individuals.

Policy Implications

At a time when expansion of the BH workforce is needed, study findings offer a road map of several viable entry points into the field. Consequently, there is value in informing prospective students that the various BH educational pathways featured in this study, on average, appear to produce similar employment experiences. From a workforce development perspective, the social work pathway might offer a reasonable return on investment, both in terms of graduate degree costs and duration between degree completions. However, earlier entry into this pathway would need to be incentivized and strategies to address potentially burdensome undergraduate loan debt would be warranted, especially among racially minoritized students. Because racial concordance between providers and those for whom they provide care is advantageous, advancing racial diversity in the BH workforce should remain a priority. Potentially helpful approaches and resources on this front include the adoption of holistic admission processes among various BH-related educational programs at undergraduate and graduate levels, as well as continued funding for the Minority Fellowship Program (SAMHSA, 2020) and other scholarship and funding supports for minoritized students.

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