

## Wild West: The Proliferation of Online Education in Social Work Calls for Educational Policy Standards

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**Abstract:** *There are increasingly more undergraduate and graduate social work programs online, with almost all social work practice doctorate programs built on an online model. Despite some concern about the proliferation and quality of select online offerings, the Council of Social Work Education (CSWE) has not developed separate or additional accreditation standards for online programs. Workforce data indicates that Black social workers are more likely than their White counterparts to attend online social work programs and have higher student loan debt. The proliferation of newly accredited social work programs, many of which are online with national catchment areas, has caused some to question whether there are too many programs and whether the quality of social work education has deteriorated given the need to chase the market share. As CSWE has publicly enhanced its commitment to antiracist practices in social work education, the time has come to institute standards to ensure that the benefits of accessibility of social work education have not resulted in unequal outcomes, especially at the economic expense of students of color. Suggestions to guide preliminary discussions about online quality standards are presented.*

**Keywords:** *Online education, accreditation, ADEI, social work practice doctorate, antiracist, educational assessment*

The advent of distance education is not new, with documentation showing that such offerings have been available to social workers since 1924 (Metropolitan Life Insurance Company, 1924). Many social work programs offer weekend and evening classes, part-time degree options, and web-based options to attract students, especially those who have work or other demands on their schedules. However, online education has historically been seen as an alternative path for a small cohort of students, not the primary method of education as is the case for many social workers today.

Online education is consistent with the *NASW Code of Ethics* (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2021), as the use of technology for coursework allows greater access, especially for those with disabilities, those living in rural areas, and those with greater caregiving and employment demands (Reamer, 2013). Hamilton (2024) reports that about 10 million or 54% of college students currently take distance education courses, with primarily online college enrollment at about 1.1 million students. In 2022, 226,433 students received bachelor's or master's degrees from predominantly online institutions (NCES, 2023). Research indicates that there is a clear overrepresentation of Black students in online undergraduate programs with 15% of Black students in undergraduate degree programs enrolled online versus only 11% of White students (Villalobos, 2023). The demand for online programs is not slowing, with revenue for these programs expected to show an

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annual growth rate of nearly 10%, resulting in a projected market volume of US \$136.55 billion by 2029 (Statista, 2025).

As a result of this proliferation, social work is now graduating an entirely new cohort of social workers—those who have received their undergraduate and graduate social work degrees from asynchronous online programs with remote placements—never having interacted in person or synchronously with social work faculty who are charged with assessing them, peers with whom they may work in the future, or clients who are seeking their assistance. To date, discretion about online formats, structures, and pedagogy has been left up to accredited programs, with the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) arguing that additional standards for online education deviate from competency-based education, which focuses on outcomes rather than processes (M. Fujita, personal communication, March 19, 2025). However, while CSWE has publicly embraced competency-based education, the organization still mandates requirements such as the number of practicum hours, release time, and full-time faculty assignments (CSWE, 2022). Thus there is precedent to impose specific guidelines to ensure quality; such an approach should be considered for online programs.

This article explores the history and current status of online social work education and advocates for accreditation standards to ensure the quality of online social work education. As students of color disproportionately access online programs, the development of such standards is consistent with CSWE's recent focus on ensuring policies and practices are not discriminatory and promote equity. Without safeguards and established quality standards, social work education may be jeopardizing the work done to date on antiracism and equal learning opportunities, especially for those who need the convenience of online education.

## Literature Review

### History of Online Social Work Education

Distance education has existed in evolving forms since the late 1800s, beginning with correspondence courses. The evolution of distance education is related to advances in available technology, starting with the United States Postal Service Rural Free Delivery mail system, which expanded mail service to all parts of the country. Students would complete coursework and mail an assigned task to the course professor for grading. At a time when universities were great distances away for many students, extension programs in rural areas and correspondence courses provided the training students desired without the travel or relocation that would have been necessary for a traditional on-ground program (Reamer, 2013).

Formal discussions of correspondence education began to appear in the early twentieth century. In 1910, Reverend Joseph H. Odell delivered an address entitled *The New Era in Education: A Study of the Psychology of Correspondence Methods of Instruction*. The speech was presented in November 1910 during the dedication ceremony for the instructional building of the International Correspondence Schools (ICS) in Scranton, Pennsylvania (Odell, 1910). In that address, he stated:

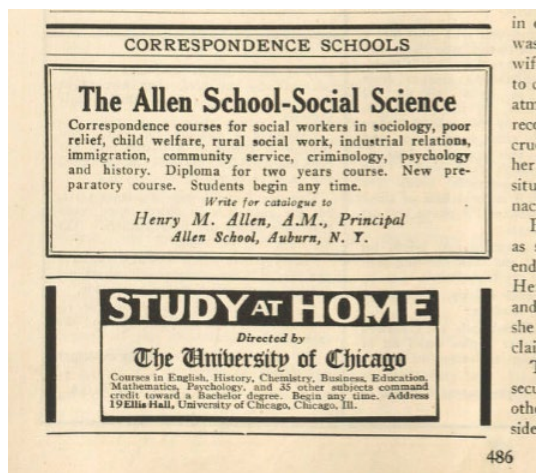
The International Correspondence Schools employ no less than 1,600 men in the United States and Canada whose main mission in life is to go through the heterogeneous mass of humanity as the Apostles of Ambition, to discover and direct and inspire their fellows with a desire for the benefit of education. I do not know any innovation upon existing methods more radical and revolutionary than this. Here is an educational institution that spends more than two million dollars a year to create a demand for education. (p. 9)

ICS did indeed create a demand for correspondence education in practical fields such as mining, ornamental design, and various engineering specialties. Starting with 500 miners in 1891, the school enrolled 190,000 students in its first eight years. In the first decades of the 1900s, 100,000 students a year enrolled in ICS training programs. ICS's success was credited to its convenience and practicality (Watkinson, 1996). A 1908 ICS document proclaimed:

Our courses are all prepared from a utilitarian standpoint; that is, it is always kept in view that the reason the student is taking one of our courses is that he desires to put the knowledge obtained into immediate practical use. We are not aiming to train the mind, but to give the student such information regarding the principles, theory, and practice as he can use with the position he is aiming to fill. (Watkinson, 1996, p. 350)

Correspondence schools spread widely and were often advertised in trade magazines, including the philanthropy and social work trade magazine *The Survey*. A February 1924 edition contained advertisements for the University of Chicago and the Allen School—Social Sciences (see Figure 1). Though it is unknown if one of the 43 study-at-home programs offered by the University of Chicago was a social work program, the Allen School offered "correspondence courses for social workers in sociology, poor relief, child welfare, rural social work, industrial relations, immigration, community service, psychology, and history," advertising a "diploma in two years" (The Survey, 1924, p. 486).

Figure 1. Advertisements in the February 1924 Edition of *The Survey*



### Television and Computer-Assisted Technology

As universities and their satellite campuses proliferated across the country, the need for correspondence courses decreased, and technology gave rise to new education delivery systems, including radio, television, and, more recently, computers. Penn State is one example of how technology has transformed the delivery of courses. The university had a vibrant correspondence program and, in the 1920s, erected a high-power radio station

with the capacity to deliver courses as far away as California. With the growth of university education following World War II and the G.I. Bill, Penn State connected 24 classrooms around the state with a live instructional television network in 1950. In 1965, the university started a public television station that broadcasted courses to students' homes in 22 counties across the state (Penn State Online Education, 2024).

As an early adopter of the emerging internet technology, Penn State began experimenting with online education in 1980 and shifted all distance education to online in 1996 (Penn State Online Education, 2024). The number of students taking college courses online in the United States doubled from 2002 to 2012 (Allen & Seaman, 2013). Online education exploded in 2012 with the development of Massive Open Online Courses led by education giants edX and Coursera. Fortunately, because universities were developing the infrastructure for online courses, most were prepared to move to fully online learning during the 2020 COVID-19 pandemic. With the addition of video technologies, such as Zoom and Microsoft Teams, and the continual improvements in Learning Management Systems such as Blackboard and Canvas, universities could move classes easily online in synchronous and asynchronous formats. COVID sped up the process of courses being offered via online or hybrid formats.

One of the earliest universities to offer a Master of Social Work (MSW) degree online was Florida State University in 2002. The University of Southern California (USC) began its synchronous online program in 2010 (Lee et al., 2019). The USC program has since grown to thousands of students and has recently been involved in a class action suit by graduates who feel they received an inferior education (Bannon, 2023; Hamilton & Watanabe, 2023). The lawsuit contends that the university misrepresented USC's online MSW program as equivalent to the on-campus version, while allegedly using aggressive recruitment tactics and outsourcing to a for-profit company. This online program is fully accredited by CSWE, calling into question whether current accreditation standards are sufficient to ensure quality and comparability of online offerings to face-to-face in-person programs.

### **Current Status of Online Social Work Education**

The number of social work programs offering online courses or entire degree programs has grown exponentially since these early programs. CSWE's yearly data calls the rising number of online programs "in line with the changing landscape of higher education" (CSWE, 2024, p. 16). Of accredited BSW programs, 19% report that 90% of their classes are online, 6% state that students could attend all online or face-to-face classes, and 28% indicate that at least one of their courses is offered online (CSWE, 2024). MSW program data shows that more than half of programs offer both in-person and online/hybrid formats. Additionally, more than two-thirds of programs that currently do not offer hybrid or online courses are planning or considering offering them in the future.

Additionally, there was a 14% increase in the number of doctorates in social work (DSW) programs in 2022-2023 compared to the past academic year, with the vast majority of DSW programs offered online. The online nature of practice doctoral programs also distinguishes this degree option from research doctorate programs, which are usually in

person. At the practice doctorate (DSW) level, almost two-thirds of programs were delivered in an online model (with more than 90% of coursework being online) (CSWE/GADE, 2021).

There is little doubt that the COVID-19 pandemic impacted social work education, with greater opportunities for online courses and practicum placements resulting. During the pandemic, CSWE allowed enhanced flexibility in allowing remote practicum placements and activities with virtually all programs making modifications, including virtually meeting with field instructors and working with clients and on projects from home (CSWE, 2020).

The expansion of online education in social work is predominantly fueled by flexibility and convenience, enhancing the feasibility of participation for a broader range of students (Reardon, 2011). This adaptability is especially valuable for increasing diversity within the profession, as it attracts individuals who may have previously been excluded due to familial or work obligations. Afrouz and Crisp (2021) highlight that online education's flexibility has opened doors for those traditionally hindered by these commitments, suggesting a more inclusive approach to social work education.

However, the financial aspect of online education presents significant challenges. Many prominent online MSW programs charge considerably higher tuition fees than their in-residence equivalents, posing a substantial barrier for students from lower-income backgrounds (Moore et al., 2015; Rutgers University [RU], 2025). For instance, the University of Southern California's online MSW program's tuition for the 2025-2026 academic year is \$108,298, without accounting for fees and optional health insurance which total \$3,027 for online students (USC, 2026). Such high costs can be prohibitive for students who aim to enter moderate-wage social work positions, potentially exacerbating financial inequities within the field. Parks et al. (2025) raise critical questions about the ethical and social justice implications of distance education, pondering whether relying on digital platforms in higher education promotes equality and diversity or disadvantages certain social classes.

Afrouz and Crisp (2021) also noted that online education could lead to cost savings associated with eliminating the need for campus travel. This finding suggests that, for some students, online education may alleviate financial burdens related to commuting and housing. Nevertheless, these potential savings do not necessarily offset the high tuition costs associated with many online programs.

Further compounding the issue, a study by the Urban Institute found that MSW degrees, along with degrees in counseling and mental health, have some of the highest debt-to-earnings (DTE) ratios (Delisle & Cohn, 2022). These degrees comprise about half of the master's degrees with the highest DTE ratios, indicating a significant financial strain on graduates. In contrast, master's degrees in teaching and nursing are far less likely to result in high DTE ratios. This discrepancy highlights the unique financial challenges faced by social work graduates. Furthermore, those who are Black, Latinx, and Native American face higher levels of student loan debt compared to their White counterparts (Hanson, 2025; Perry et al., 2021).

Moreover, private nonprofit institutions are heavily overrepresented among master's degree programs, which leads to high DTE ratios. This overrepresentation underscores the need for careful consideration of the financial viability of these programs. When examining race and ethnicity, the Urban Institute study revealed that Black and Hispanic students are disproportionately represented in programs with the highest DTE ratios. This overrepresentation indicates a systemic issue where students from minority backgrounds are more likely to incur significant debt relative to their earnings potential, further entrenching economic disparities (Delisle & Cohn, 2022).

While online education in social work offers considerable benefits in terms of flexibility and inclusivity, significant challenges remain, particularly regarding the financial burdens placed on students. Addressing these challenges requires a multifaceted approach that considers both the accessibility and affordability of online programs. By doing so, the field of social work can ensure that it remains inclusive and equitable, providing opportunities for all students to succeed without undue financial hardship.

### **Racial Disparities in Online Education**

According to the George Washington University Health Workforce Institute (2019), 22% of Black MSW graduates receive their graduate social work instruction online compared to 17% of White MSW graduates. This workforce data also indicates that in-person social work education may have more positive outcomes and can be less costly. In-person educated social workers tend to report higher incomes than online graduates: 74% of the in-person graduates earn \$40,000 or more in annual income compared to 61% of the online MSWs (Salsberg et al., 2020). Interestingly, online graduate programs can be more expensive than in-person programs (Apgar & Nienow, 2023). An analysis of tuition at one state university revealed that in-state tuition was 80% of the online cost for the same degree (RU, 2025). Thus, while online education has increased access to social work education, students, including those of color, are more likely to pay more for the same degrees. Additionally, a study of social service administrators indicated that they felt in-person MSW degrees are preferable to those attained online, especially with respect to clinical training (Curran et al., 2020). These findings can have implications for employment of online graduates, including social workers of color, raising issues of cost and job equity.

Additionally, recent data indicates that 65% of practice doctorate program enrollees identify as students of color, with 40% being Black individuals (CSWE/GADE, 2021). Thus, the decision of the profession to accredit the practice doctorate has the potential to significantly increase diversity within the profession as a larger proportion of Black students are found in DSW versus PhD programs. However, data reveal that some DSW programs are operated by private, for-profit entities with far less financial assistance than PhD programs (CSWE/GADE, 2021).

The racial disparity in the utilization of online education within social work raises important considerations regarding access, quality, and equity. While online education can provide increased access for aspiring social workers, it is crucial to examine the potential implications of this disparity on educational outcomes, career opportunities, and the overall quality of education received. While online education can offer flexibility and accessibility,

it is essential to ensure that the educational experience and resources provided are high quality and meet the needs of diverse students.

### **Efficacy of Online Social Work Education**

The expansion of online education in social work has been met with mixed perceptions and a range of ethical questions. The effectiveness of online social work education in achieving CSWE competencies, particularly those that are practice-oriented, is a point of significant debate. Levin et al. (2018) revealed that social work educators generally view online education as less effective than traditional on-the-ground education in helping students meet CSWE competencies. This perception is particularly pronounced regarding practice-oriented competencies. Their regression analyses indicated that factors such as tenure status, years of full-time teaching, technological preparedness, and level of exposure to online education significantly influence these perceptions.

Additionally, online students who acknowledge that seeing the instructor is beneficial and that there is "more to gain" by being in person, remain satisfied with online learning due to the flexibility and time/cost savings of commuting to campus (Okech et al., 2014, p. 132). Afrouz and Crisp (2021) found that student satisfaction with online programs is generally comparable to in-person programs, although there are inconsistencies across studies. For instance, Forgey and Ortega-Williams (2016) reported higher satisfaction among online students, while McAllister (2013) found the opposite.

Canada et al. (2021) revealed that online students tend to have more practical experience and perceive themselves as more adept in social work practice skills compared to their in-person counterparts. This self-perception of competence among online students underscores the potential of online education to produce confident and capable social work professionals. However, these ratings were subjective and may not compensate for concerns about the format's effectiveness in skill acquisition.

Fabriz et al. (2021) found significant differences in outcomes between synchronous and asynchronous learning, with students who studied mostly in synchronous settings reporting more peer-centered activities (such as feedback), greater support of their basic psychological needs, and higher overall satisfaction in comparison to students in mostly asynchronous settings. While not outcomes, these findings suggest that course design decisions may meaningfully influence student engagement and perceived support, particularly when opportunities for real-time interaction are limited. They also imply that programs relying heavily on asynchronous delivery may need to intentionally integrate structured peer feedback and interactive components to mitigate potential gaps in satisfaction and connection.

Cummings et al. (2015) noted that there is less certainty about attaining knowledge and skills in online settings, with comparability assessments being very limited. Research by Cummings et al. (2015) found that online students at one university performed at least as well as their in-person counterparts in terms of knowledge attainment and skill development. Similarly, Canada et al. (2021) found parity in learning outcomes between online and in-person students. However, these findings were limited to single courses and

specific points in time, reducing their generalizability. Much of the comparability research focuses on specific courses or programs, limiting the generalizability of the findings.

Additionally, Lee et al. (2019) pointed out that most studies use grades as outcome variables to stress the comparability of online and face-to-face instruction. Given grade inflation in higher education and the weak correlation between grade attainment and learning (Denning et al., 2022; Gelber, 2020). Lee et al. (2019) indicate that this approach is flawed. Additionally, few studies on online experiences and outcomes are based on the experiences of students of color, especially as compared with their White peers.

Reamer (2013) raised critical ethical questions regarding the proliferation of online social work programs. He questioned the overarching motives behind the promotion of online education and whether sufficient attention is being paid to the quality of education and student learning outcomes. Davis et al. (2019) emphasized that decisions about online programs should be driven by the scholarship of learning and teaching, rather than revenue. Additionally, Halaas et al. (2020) raised concerns about gatekeeping and academic honesty in online versus in-person social work education, with faculty indicating that practices to address these issues are not as heavily emphasized in hybrid/online programs. However, a lack of in-person contact between students and professors complicates verifying student identities during exams and the authenticity of written assignments. This issue is compounded by the possibility of minimal interaction between students and full-time or tenured faculty, who may only be involved in grading rather than teaching.

Reamer (2013) highlighted concerns about online education's quality and integrity more than a decade ago. He cited an example from a university where a faculty member reported that online instruction and assignments could be completed in significantly less time than in-person instruction. This raises questions about the adequacy of monitoring and assessing students' interpersonal skills, online course engagement, and nonverbal behaviors in an online environment.

The effectiveness and ethical considerations of online social work education remain contentious issues. While students often appreciate the flexibility of online learning, educators are concerned about their ability to effectively teach practice-oriented competencies and maintain academic integrity in an online environment (Osburn et al., 2021). Further research, particularly in the context of rapid technological changes and the COVID-19 pandemic, is necessary to address these concerns and ensure that online social work education meets the high standards required for professional practice.

### Recommendations for the Future

To date, CSWE has stated that additional accreditation standards are not needed for online coursework or programs as the method of delivery should be the purview of programs with no additional mandates needed if assessment outcomes and standards are met. The problem with that argument is that sufficient data needs to be collected via the accreditation process to ensure that vulnerabilities that can jeopardize quality in an online environment are addressed. For example, the discussion model of teaching or the Socratic method of questioning has been found to be essential to integrating material for knowledge acquisition and problem-solving (Ying, 2020). Learning by effective listening and discussions with peers has historically been considered essential to intellectual growth in higher education (Adler, 1997). While possible in asynchronous online programs, there needs to be a more deliberate effort to facilitate such student interactions as students are not gathering simultaneously either online or in person.

CSWE would likely want to use the same process that it currently uses for other accreditation requirements for developing any standards related to online education. This process starts with outlining educational policy and then developing specific standards based on this policy. While CSWE does not have any published educational policy related to online education, they did work collaboratively with the National Association of Social Workers, the Association of Social Work Boards, and the Clinical Social Work Association to revise the *Standards for Technology in Social Work Practice* ('the Standards') which has a section on distance learning (NASW et al., 2017). While seven years have passed since the revision of the Standards, they serve as a good starting point to ensure quality. The following suggestions are based upon the content contained in the Standards and serve as agreed upon best practices in online learning by organizations representing the three pillars of social work, practice, regulation, and education.

According to the Standards, online social work education should ensure that social workers using technology for instructional purposes develop competence in the ethical use of technology tailored to the specific context. Social workers should be familiar with technology-mediated tools applicable in classrooms, field settings, and workplaces, enabling the delivery of education in traditional, online, or hybrid formats. CSWE currently requires those who teach practice courses in master's programs, and program and practicum directors in bachelor's and master's programs have at least two years of post-master's practice experience, though there is no requirement that faculty have mastered specific practice skills during these two-year periods (CSWE, 2022). Perhaps a more prescriptive standard could be created to ensure adequate teaching experience and knowledge of online tools before instructors are charged with educating exclusively online.

Using more rigorous quasi-experimental and experimental evaluation designs, social workers should evaluate how well technology-enabled education helps students master core and essential professional skills using objective measures. They must engage in ongoing education, study, training, consultation, and supervision with professionals proficient in educational technology. Keeping up to date with emerging knowledge related to technology-mediated education is crucial, as is considering pedagogical theories and research when deciding on the use of technology for educational purposes. Programs that

deliver synchronous and asynchronous should justify why these methods of service delivery are consistent with pedagogical outcomes and ensure that those who are online are not disadvantaged by comparing learning outcomes that transcend course grades.

Creating learning experiences that promote student success and develop social work competencies is fundamental. This involves using student-centered instructional strategies that connect with real-world practice, such as peer-based learning, inquiry-based activities, collaborative learning, discussion groups, self-directed learning, case studies, small group work, and guided design. Incorporating technology-based adaptive devices into the curriculum ensures delivery of accessible services. These andragogical techniques may be best implemented in synchronous online education which allows for the instant exchange of ideas in discussion groups and small group work. Synchronous exchanges also enhance a sense of community and ensure that all students receive accessible support during live sessions, thus enhancing engagement and learning outcomes.

Cultural competency issues related to technology use must be addressed, including students' familiarity and comfort with technology, internet access, language translation software, and the needs of diverse populations, such as people with different physical abilities. A range of existing and emerging technologies should be used to support student learning and engagement in the online environment.

Facilitating and monitoring appropriate interaction among students is important, as is promoting student success through clear expectations, prompt responses, and regular feedback. Social workers should model, guide, and encourage legal, ethical, and safe behavior related to technology use. Assessing students' varying learning styles, literacy levels, disabilities, access to technology, and accommodation needs, including adaptive and assistive technologies, is crucial. Additionally, ensuring that students are competent in using the proposed technology effectively and ethically is essential, and steps must be taken to protect the confidentiality of personal student information in accordance with relevant laws and ethical standards.

Remote learning in which students have cameras on and are synchronously participating via electronic platforms such as Zoom, Teams, or Webex mirrors in-person learning. However, as online programs deviate from this standard by not requiring cameras on, being asynchronous, and so on, there appears to be a greater need for more safeguards and additional quality standards. In asynchronous learning environments, students often face challenges in maintaining engagement, as the lack of real-time interaction can lead to feelings of isolation and reduced motivation (Baker & Tukhvatulina, 2023). Furthermore, the absence of live educational supervision may result in students missing out on important collaborative learning experiences, which are key to fostering critical thinking and practical skills in fields like social work (Woo & Reeves, 2008).

Online instruction is not homogeneous, with variations that include real-time, visual interactions with faculty on one end of the continuum and asynchronous computer-based, self-study options on the other. Accreditation documents should consider requiring more specificity with regard to faculty-student interaction and feedback when initially considering and periodically reviewing online social work education programs. Annual survey data collected on accredited programs should also include more specificity about

online delivery as the specific methods used by programs may help shed light on where on the faculty-student interaction and feedback continuum programs fall.

Specific standards for consideration are listed in the subsequent subsection. Some of these proposed standards might also be helpful for in-person programs that incorporate technology in the classroom. While not all these standards may eventually be incorporated into accreditation and reaffirmation reviews, they are presented to facilitate robust discussions in the academy about these issues, so that safeguards are instituted to reduce inequities.

### **Some Suggested Standards for Online Education**

- *Ethical competence and contextual use*: Social work programs should mandate that educators and trainers using technology receive certification or training in ethical technology use. For example, a standard should require completion of an approved course in digital ethics and privacy, including mandatory modules on digital citizenship and cybersecurity for both educators and students.
- *Familiarity with technology tools*: Programs should ensure that faculty are trained in various technology-mediated tools. A standard should specify that educators demonstrate proficiency in both use of technology tools and pedagogy using these tools. Currently, social work programs are required to submit faculty curriculum vitas for initial accreditation and reaffirmation. These vitas should be reviewed to ensure adequate training and experience with online education.
- *Student engagement and interaction*: Standards should ensure that online programs facilitate student interaction. For example, courses could be required to include regular synchronous sessions and interactive discussion boards. Currently, students are not “on camera” in asynchronous and synchronous programs that do not have policies that require “on camera” interactions. The inability to observe student interactions is important in order to assess nonverbal behaviors essential for engagement and professional practice.
- *Adaptive and accessible technologies*: Accreditation standards should require programs to account for how online programs support students with disabilities. For example, all online courses must be compatible with screen readers and provide captions for video content. Technology should also ensure multilingual support and consider students’ varying access to technology.
- *Assessment of student performance*: As assessments are given outside of the classroom, there is a need to ensure that enrolled students are the ones completing the assignments, taking tests, etc. Programs should have standards for ensuring integrity of the assessment process.

### **Discussion and Conclusions**

There is a long history of correspondence, distant, and online social work education

programs that have undeniably increased access to social work education, particularly for individuals who face barriers to traditional in-person education. This includes those with disabilities, those living in rural areas, and individuals with significant caregiving or employment responsibilities. The flexibility offered by online programs aligns with the *NASW Code of Ethics*, which advocates for greater accessibility to education. Presently, the social work professional workforce is strained and in need of additional trained social workers. The Bureau of Labor Statistics (BLS, 2025) predicts that overall employment of social workers will grow at a projected 6% from 2024 to 2034, which is above average for all occupations. On average, there will be 74,000 openings for social workers each year as the need increases and to replace those exiting the field (BLS, 2025). Quality online education may be one way of meeting the need.

However, the rapid expansion of online education in social work has sparked significant debate regarding its efficacy, equity, and alignment with the core values of social work, particularly those related to social justice and antiracist practices (Apgar & Nienow, 2023). Bad professional education is no education at all and can be dangerous for consumers. Recently, the U.S. Department of Education (DOE) removed social work as a professional degree, impacting student loan borrowing limits which may have a negative impact on attracting those with financial strains from entering the profession (American Council on Education, 2026). For social work to ensure equitable education, it must focus, as it has for most of its existence, on the quality of its education, its accessibility, and the impact on one of the most important social work student populations: students of color.

CSWE has maintained that competency-based education should focus on outcomes rather than processes, which has resulted in a lack of specific accreditation standards for online programs (CSWE, 2022). However, this stance has raised concerns by both faculty and students about the consistency and quality of online social work education (Davis et al., 2019; Jones, 2015). While some studies suggest that online education can achieve comparable learning outcomes to traditional in-person education, there is a notable lack of comprehensive, long-term research to support these claims unequivocally (Afrouz & Crisp, 2021; Canada et al., 2021). Additionally, the unique challenges of teaching and assessing practice-oriented competencies in an online format have not been adequately addressed.

The absence of standardized guidelines leaves individual programs to determine their own methods, potentially leading to significant variations in educational quality. While no one likes additional standards that might require more training and assessment, new online delivery methods call for guidelines for those delivering courses online. What works in the classroom does not necessarily work in the online environment. With the exponential growth of online social work programs, especially at the DSW level, guidelines for online teaching formats are a necessity.

In addition, the financial burden of online education remains a critical issue. Prominent online MSW programs often charge higher tuition fees than their in-person counterparts, creating significant financial barriers for lower-income students (Moore et al., 2015; RU, 2025). This differential is particularly concerning given the higher debt-to-earnings ratios associated with social work degrees, which can widen economic disparities among graduates. Given the racial disparities in online social work education, any compromised

quality is particularly troubling. With data already indicating that Black social workers are more likely to enroll in online programs and subsequently incur higher levels of student debt compared to their White counterparts, the financial burden is compounded by the fact that in-person social work education tends to yield higher income outcomes for graduates (GWU, 2019; Salsberg et al., 2020).

Furthermore, the perception among social service administrators is that in-person MSW degrees are preferable to online degrees, particularly in terms of clinical training. This raises questions about the long-term career implications for graduates of online programs. The overrepresentation of students of color in high-cost, high-debt online programs underscores the need for careful consideration of these programs' financial viability and equitable access and may disadvantage these students in job interviews given administrators' perceptions.

The proliferation of online social work education presents both opportunities and challenges. While online programs have increased accessibility and flexibility, they have also introduced significant concerns regarding quality, equity, and financial burden (Apgar & Nienow, 2022). CSWE's commitment to competency-based education and antiracist practices must extend to the development of specific accreditation standards for online programs to ensure that the benefits of accessibility do not come at the expense of educational quality or equity.

As the profession of social work continues to evolve, especially in educational technology, it is imperative that stakeholders, including educators and accrediting bodies, collaborate to create robust standards that are based on professional integrity. These standards should address the unique challenges of online education to ensure equitable access and outcomes for all students. Social work education, in all forms, must align with the core values of the profession. By doing so, the social work field can better prepare future practitioners to meet the complex needs of diverse communities while advancing the goals of social justice and equity.

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