

The Online Bilingual MSW Program: Innovation in Social Work Education

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Abstract: *The process of design and implementation of the Online Bilingual (Spanish and English) Master of Social Work (OBMSW) at Loyola University Chicago is presented. This innovative program enhances the clinical training of social work students serving Latinx, immigrant, and refugee communities. The OBMSW utilizes an online platform, offers learning in a bilingual environment, is taught by a completely Latinx faculty body, and is guided by a curriculum that is responsive to current challenges experienced by Latinx and immigrant populations in the U.S. Preliminary, mixed-methods data of this promising approach to social work education is included. Additionally, a description of the adjustments and changes made during the implementation stage resulting from student advocacy and the self-evaluation exercises conducted is offered. Limitations and potential future opportunities are discussed. The innovative OBMSW program can serve as a model for social work programs across the U.S. interested in preparing social workers to meet the unmet, growing mental health service needs of the bilingual Latinx populations. Additionally, the OBMSW program's online format can increase student access on a national level.*

Keywords: *Bilingual education; social work; innovation; MSW; Latinx; immigrants; refugees*

Latinxs constitute the second-largest racial/ethnic group in the U.S., comprising 18.5% of the population (U.S. Census Bureau, 2020). In this paper, the authors will use the word Latinx to describe individuals that identify as Hispanic, Latino, Latina, or Latine to acknowledge gender diversity. This population has rapidly expanded in the last four decades, primarily due to migration. Although Latinxs have had a long presence in the United States, it is well-documented that this group has been underrepresented in higher education (Burkham, 2019). According to the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2021), Latinx students are also underrepresented in social work graduate programs in the United States.

As the U.S. Latinx population grows, the unmet health and mental health service needs gap widens for U.S.-born Latinxs, Latinx immigrants, and refugees (Bucay-Harari et al., 2020). Factors contributing to this unmet need include barriers to access and a shortage of Latinx professional personnel. Other barriers include a lack of linguistically and culturally appropriate services, insurance coverage, transportation, information about mental health services, and organizational capacity to provide culturally relevant services.

The Online Bilingual Master of Social Work (OBMSW) program of Loyola University Chicago was developed and implemented in the fall of 2018 with the intent to increase bilingual (English-Spanish) Latinx mental health professionals in underserved

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communities, and thus, help fill the gap of unmet mental health needs specifically in Latinx communities. Within an institution committed to social justice for more than a century, with a diverse and excellence-oriented faculty, this program was designed to be online, accompanied by a practical curriculum that includes 1,000 internship hours (or 600 hours, for advanced-standing students).

This paper provides an overview of the OBMSW's innovative design and implementation. Preliminary results of student surveys, self-assessments, and faculty and staff focus groups identify program implementation challenges. Opportunities for growth are also discussed.

Latinxs in U.S. and Mental Health Access

The U.S. Latinx population surpassed 62 million in 2020 (Krogstad & Noe-Bustamante, 2021). Health concerns for Latinx groups in the U.S. include diabetes, heart disease, liver disease, HIV/AIDS, high rates of obesity, and access to care (U.S. Department of Health & Human Services, 2021b). Artiga et al. (2021) state, "Nearly one in four (24%) Hispanic adults overall report no usual source of care other than an emergency room" (p. 5). Mental health concerns and needs for Latinxs in the U.S. are also evident. In 2019, serious psychological distress was reported by 12.2 percent of Latinx adults, and suicide was the second leading cause of death of Latinxs between 15 and 34 years of age (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2021a). Yet, data from Substance Abuse and Mental Health Service Administration (2020) reports that in 2019, only 9.7% of Latinx adults 18 years old and older received mental health services, 7.3% received prescription medications for mental health services, and only 58% of Latinxs who had experienced a major depressive episode received treatment for depression. A study conducted by the UCLA Center for Health Policy Research (2021) found similar trends in mental health needs among Latinxs in California; six out of ten Latinx adults with serious or moderate psychological distress who were interviewed had unmet needs for mental health care.

Limited access to healthcare, including high-quality care due to lack of health insurance, and structural and cultural barriers, have impacted the health of Latinx populations (Shiro & Reeves, 2020). Keisler-Starkey and Bunch's (2020) report for the U.S. Census Bureau, from data collected in 2019, indicates that of all racial or ethnic groups in the U.S., Latinxs had the highest uninsured rates (16.7%). Patient limited English proficiency (LEP) has also been found to be a barrier to healthcare (Becerra et al., 2015; Cordasco et al., 2011; Marshall et al., 2005; Vitale & Bailey, 2012). Another barrier that has been shown to influence access is the linguistic and racial/ethnic mismatch between healthcare providers and Latinx patients (Oh et al., 2020; Rivers & Patino, 2006; Tulumiero et al., 2021; Vitale & Bailey, 2012). Federal and state-level immigration policies that impede or restrict access to care are also significant structural barriers, such as the "exclusionary policies negatively affect[ing] the health of Latinos in the U.S.—regardless of immigration- or documentation-status" (Philbin et al., 2018, p. 37). Fear, confusion, and misinformation are common factors that affect and limit access for mixed-status families (Castañeda & Melo, 2014). There is ample evidence of discrimination in the healthcare

system (Becerra et al., 2015; López-Cevallos & Harvey, 2016). Andrade and colleagues' (2020) systematic review concluded, "The current sociopolitical scenario and overall anti-immigrant rhetoric may place Latinos at greater risk of experiencing racial/ethnic discrimination and consequently having poorer mental and physical health outcomes" (p. 13). Nevertheless, evidence suggests that facilitating access to healthcare, including mental health services, would increase utilization among this population. A Collaborative for Community Wellness (2018) report conducted to assess mental health needs in Latinx communities in Chicago found that 80% of Latinxs reported they would participate in mental health services if services were geographically accessible, culturally and linguistically appropriate, and affordable.

The Need for Bilingual Latinx Social Workers

A skilled and diverse healthcare professional workforce could, arguably, facilitate the processes of marginalized and underserved communities obtaining needed health and mental health services. Of particular necessity are social workers who are Spanish-English bilingual/bicultural and able to work with Spanish-speaking Latinx communities (Arriaza, 2015; Furman et al., 2009; Marrs Fuchsel, 2015; Olcoñ et al., 2018). A study by Garcia et al. (2019) highlights the need to target and alleviate the mental health risk of certain Latinx subgroups (i.e., men with limited English proficiency) by recommending that "to be effective, primary care practices must ensure that screening is closely tied to the provision of culturally, linguistically, and gender-appropriate services" (p. 1250). Ayón (2014) similarly calls on social workers to utilize culturally grounded strategies to distribute needed and limited resources, collaborate with immigration advocates, and stay up to date on immigration legislation, to build ties with community members and advocate for immigration reform that supports Latinx immigrant families to meet their service needs. Lin and Wiley (2019) call on social work educators to recognize the potential of students with immigrant backgrounds and bicultural identities to integrate and prepare them to work with immigrant communities. Bilingual and bicultural social work students can and should be supported and prepared to actively and intentionally mitigate the inequities that beset Latinx communities.

Latinx Students in Social Work Education

Latinx students are currently and historically underrepresented in social work programs. CSWE (2021) reports that in 2020, Hispanic/Latinx students comprised 17.9% of baccalaureate programs, 15.8% of master's programs, 14.9% of practice doctoral programs, and 10.7% of research doctorate programs. In their analysis of social work education and Latinx students, Calvo and coauthors (2018) point out, "social work education is not preparing Latinxs to join the profession at a pace comparable to their growth in the general population" (p. 264). Factors such as financial conditions, immigration status, adjustments to non-Latinx environments, discrimination, limitations with English proficiency, being non-traditionally aged students, and having to balance employment and parenting responsibilities were cited as challenges for Latinx social work students by Negroni-Rodríguez et al. (2006). The underrepresentation of Latinx faculty to

guide and mentor Latinx students has also been recognized as a factor impacting Latinx student recruitment and retention in social work programs (Rojas-Schwan et al., 2013; Tijerina & Deepak, 2014).

Conversely, there are various strategies and recommendations to foment the presence of Latinx students in social work and to support those already enrolled in programs. The presence and mentorship of Latinx faculty to support students on various levels have been found to be of great importance (Calvo et al., 2018; Cordero & Negroni, 2013; Mendoza et al., 2019; Rojas-Schwan et al., 2013). Alcocer and Martinez (2018) found that mentorship supports Latinx students in their transitions and adaptations to higher education and helps with retention and academic achievement. Olcoñ et al. (2018) emphasize the need and impact for social work programs and universities to promote an assets-based perspective, such as building on students' community cultural wealth. Integration of Latinx-focused content and research (Calvo et al., 2018; Chandler et al., 2014; Olcoñ et al., 2018), financial assistance (Longoria, 2010; Negroni-Rodríguez et al., 2006; Olcoñ et al., 2018), and bilingual (Spanish-English) materials, services, communication, and classes (Calvo et al., 2018; Negroni-Rodríguez et al., 2006; Olcoñ et al., 2018) have also been found to be key in the experience and environment of Latinx social work students.

Social Work with a Focus on Immigrants and Refugees

There are a limited, but growing number of domestic and international social work programs with an emphasis or specialization in practice with immigrant and refugee populations. Social work practice and education have been signaled as having great potential in their role for advancing the rights of immigrants (Padilla, 1997; Popescu & Libal, 2018). Immigration policies, theories, and models of social work practice with immigrants, the development of service delivery models for immigrant populations, and the study of specific issues relevant to immigrant communities are among the areas of focus for social work education (Sakamoto, 2007). Although some social work programs have made strides towards preparing their students to work with these specific populations, schools of social work are called upon to work towards improving student training and curricula focused on immigrant populations and issues (Lin & Wiley, 2019; Ostrander et al., 2017).

Bilingual Social Work Education

The recognition of the need for bicultural and bilingual social workers to work with predominantly non-English language communities, such as Latinx and immigrant populations, has prompted a call to attend to language diversity training and education within social work programs. Examples of such pedagogical proposals include a workshop to train monolingual and multilingual students and practitioners (Doering-White et al., 2019), a cross-cultural service-learning project that used consultants from the Spanish Language Department (Belliveau, 2011), a certificate program that includes a language component with the goal of graduating students fluent in Spanish (Sisneros & Alter, 2009), courses built to improve Spanish clinical vocabulary and cultural awareness (Lusk et al., 2014; Sevilla et al., 2018), a two-semester-long course taught in Spanish that focuses on

cognitive behavioral therapy in Spanish (Cintrón et al., 2018), cultural immersion study trips to Latin America (Cox et al., 2006), and a BSW program with a majority Latinx student population, many of whom are bilingual and some who are working towards English fluency, that views the utilization of Spanglish, “as a valid form of communication rather than a linguistic drawback” (Olcoñ et al., 2018, p. 356).

Online Learning

Online learning has come a long way from its origins. A once unfavored method of providing social work education has gained traction among public and private universities in the U.S. (Kurzman, 2013; Reamer, 2013). Detres et al. (2020) report that enrollment in online courses increased by 17.3% between 2002 and 2011 and that MSW online program offerings increased from 11% in 2012 to almost 20% in 2017. According to the Council of Social Work Education’s Website, Directory of Accredited Programs, there are currently 194 active online MSW programs and one online bilingual MSW program. Between 2004 and 2016, there were 22 MSW-accredited online programs; between 2017 and 2020, 105 universities added online MSW programs to their social work programs. And between 2021 and 2024, during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, 67 universities adopted online MSW programs (CSWE, n.d.). Research has shown (Forgey & Ortega-Williams, 2016) that online social work education is as effective and comparable to face-to-face programs. According to Forgey and Ortega-Williams (2016), “The benefits of online social work education have been documented, and clear evidence has been mounting as to its effectiveness” (p. 60).

Jones (2015) notes that a significant benefit of online social work education is access for non-traditional students who would otherwise not be able to obtain a graduate education. Also, the online platform provides students with the flexibility to complete their education without social complexities or time restraints that a face-to-face program may have, such as limited transportation, family commitments, or work obligations (Kurzman, 2013). Conversely, some disadvantages in online learning that have been noted are access to updated hardware and to high-speed broadband internet access in rural areas and low-income urban communities (Eruchalu et al., 2021). Additionally, Detres et al. (2020) note that some adult learners may experience anxiety while learning to use technology in an online environment, resulting in low retention rates.

The OBMSW Model

In 2018, Loyola University Chicago’s (LUC), School of Social Work (LUC-SSW), launched an Online Bilingual Master of Social Work program (OBMSW). The OBMSW program directly attends to the unmet needs of the Latinx mental health workforce by providing an accessible option for graduate education. The program is unique in its reformatting of the current accredited MSW program mental health specialization and migration studies in a bilingual and online format. This reformatting was significant in that it offers: 1) a completely online option, which can be pursued locally or nationally at a distance; 2) a bilingual Spanish/English graduate study format that is attractive for heritage Spanish-speaking students, English language learning immigrants, and Spanish as a second

language speakers working towards improving their linguistic skills for professional use; and 3) comprehensive integrated mental health training with a focus on refugee and immigration populations.

In this program, all students follow a course of study in the advanced clinical specialization and migration studies track. Courses are taught in a Spanish/English bilingual format by qualified bilingual and bicultural Latinx instructors. The online format includes weekly synchronous real-time video conference class sessions and weekly asynchronous learning modules, and flexibility for students to complete coursework at a time that is convenient for them. Additionally, students have the option of submitting written assignments and oral presentations in the language that they prefer, while encouraged and supported to complete assignments in the language in which they seek to improve proficiency.

A Bilingual Program

Much of the uniqueness of the OBMSW model is centered around its bilingual instruction aspect. The preparation of social workers with linguistic knowledge and skills is key in collaborating with and meeting the needs of Spanish-dominant Latinx communities. It is with this end in mind that the OBMSW set its deliberate goal of a bilingual program for its students and, by extension, the Latinx communities they may work with in the future.

The original proposed bilingual graduate study format was believed to be attractive for heritage Spanish-speaking, English language learning, and international students. Although the original program proposal included international students, the program has not offered international enrollment. The bilingual format makes an MSW more attractive and accessible to Spanish-English bilingual students, and the professional command of both languages also adds to the skill set employers are seeking. Additionally, this programmatic expansion for Spanish-speaking students simultaneously supports the LUC-SSW and the university's common goal of diversifying the faculty, staff, and student body. This purposeful addition indicated a shift in the traditional perspectives and experiences involved in program planning and implementation. Various systematic efforts towards the goal of building a bilingual program included, but were not limited to, the development of bilingual courses, the translation of key LUC-SSW documents into Spanish, collaboration with the LUC-SSW librarian to develop new and comprehensive sets of resources in Spanish, and the hiring and building of a bilingual and bicultural program team. Additionally, before commencing the program, students were encouraged to take recommended Spanish and English language assessments to measure their proficiency in both languages.

Focus on Mental Health and Migration Studies

Another distinctive feature of this innovative program is its focus on mental health practices related to the Latinx immigrant and refugee communities in the U.S. These unique foci are meant to recognize and address the Latinx and immigrant/refugee community's

unmet mental health service needs. The program builds on LUC-SSW's clinical curricular novelties and strengths in migration studies, clinical and interprofessional practice, social justice-focused policy, and organizational and direct practice interventions. Within the program, students take three migration studies courses:

- SOWK 730 Migration Dynamics and U.S. Social Policy
- SOWK 731 Social Work Practice with Refugees & Immigrants
- SOWK 732 Migration, Social Justice, & Human Rights

The program's clinical bilingual curriculum and focus on migration studies prepares students for clinical practice with Latinx immigrant and refugee communities. Additionally, because of the bilingual format of the program, students can gain proficiency in linguistic and cultural competencies. For example, since instruction is delivered in Spanish and English, an instructor might choose to teach in Spanish one week and transition to English the following week and rotate every other week. Students have the option of submitting their assignments in Spanish or English and have the option of conducting oral class presentations in the language that they prefer. Students are encouraged to engage in the language that they feel the least proficient in. Additionally, about 75% of the course readings within the curriculum, including academic journals and books, are written in Spanish by scholars from Mexico, Central America, and South America.

Field Education

A staple of social work education is the curriculum's field education component, which offers students the opportunity to integrate classroom acquired knowledge with demonstrated skills and competencies in community social work practice. The field placement serves as a hands-on training ground where students can hone their practice skills, test theory, and develop a professional identity grounded in social work ethics and values. In this program, students must complete 400 hours of first-level field and an integrative seminar during their first semester. Students with Advanced Standing status complete 600 hours for advanced field and participate in an integrative seminar during their first semester. Students have the option of being placed in diverse internship sites that include community schools, community non-profit organizations, faith-based organizations, and hospitals. A requirement of the internship site is that the site must offer opportunities for students to engage and practice their skills with the Latinx immigrant and refugee community.

Challenges in identifying field sites for students outside the city of where the physical location of the university is located have arisen for the OBMSW field team and students. Most of the enrolled OBMSW students are located out of state. Students from fall 2019, fall 2020, and fall 2021 cohorts had seven out of forty-three, eight out of twenty-one, and nine out of twenty-one in-state resident students, respectively. Students who are based in the metropolitan city where Loyola University Chicago is located can easily tap into organizations that have long-standing relationships with LUC-SSW. Students in the OBMSW that reside outside of the city and state are required to actively identify potential

agencies for their internship. Once students identify prospects, the field coordinator of the OBMSW works to confirm that the organization meets the requirements set forth by the Council of Social Work Education. This process has been challenging for students who do not have experience within the social service sector and those who live in rural areas. Another challenge in rural areas has been a lack of bilingual field supervisors that can provide supervision to OBMSW students. However, the OBMSW has been able to hire field-liaisons who are bilingual and bicultural to provide supervision to those students who do not have bilingual field supervisors at their respective internship sites.

Program Instructors and Staff Members

The OBMSW adds to its innovative approach through its faculty employment and development. From its inception, the program has been led by a 100% Latinx administration, staff, and faculty, contrasting the 7.8% of full-time faculty members in U.S. social work programs who identified as Latinx in the fall of 2020 (CSWE, 2021). Most of the OBMSW classes are taught by full-time faculty members, which has been found to positively influence online student learning outcomes (Mueller et al., 2013). The presence of Latinx faculty has been identified as an important aspect of the experience and success of students (Medina & Posadas, 2012). Similarly, mentoring and relationships with students can also be an opportunity for Latinx faculty members to continue strengthening their ties and connections with Latinx students and communities (Mendoza et al., 2019).

The LUC-SSW and its dean considered the unique nature of the OBMSW and actively recruited professors who are bilingual, bicultural and have experience in the field, providing the program capacity and expertise. Faculty and staff hired were provided with professional development opportunities and guidance to collaboratively create an online instructional format reflecting best practices in online instruction and humanistic tradition and andragogy, as well as the program goal of developing graduates dedicated to attending to the integrated health needs and social conditions impacting marginalized communities. With these goals and the OBMSW student population in mind, the staff of the program in its initial year was comprised of a program director, program coordinator, academic advisor, internship coordinator, admissions advisor, assistant director of online learning, and full-time and adjunct faculty who all had heritage from several different Latin American countries.

OBMSW Curriculum Structure

During the fall of 2019, the LUC-SSW faculty, in conjunction with the dean's leadership, voted and approved an update and redesign to the LUC-SSW's curriculum. The overarching goal for this change was to increase accessibility through the reduction in the cost for the degree and to engage in intentional discussion of the core concepts to be infused throughout the curriculum. The new revised curriculum was launched in the fall of 2021. The revisions consisted of a reduction of courses, which brought the required credit units from 60 to 49 credit units, and from 34 to 23 credit units for students with advanced standing. With the revised curriculum, students take two courses per semester during the first three semesters (See Table 1).

Table 1. *Curriculum Structure*

Semester	Classes	Credits
Fall 2021	SOWK 500- Lifespan Development, Human Behavior, Trauma, & Theory SOWK 501- Assessment of Client Concerns in Context	6 CU
Spring 2022	SOWK 502- Power, Oppression, Privilege, & Social Justice SOWK 503- Practice Skills with Individuals & Families	6 CU
Summer 2022	SOWK 504- Integrated Micro/Mezzo/Macro Theory & Practice SOWK 505- Group Practice in Social Work: Micro, Mezzo, Macro	6 CU
Fall 2022	SOWK 506- Research & Evaluation in Social Work Practice SOWK 509- Social Work Policy & Community Interventions SWFI 530- Field I & Simulated Experiences SWFI 530s- Integrative Seminar	7.5 CU
Spring 2023	SOWK 680- Advanced Clinical Practice SOWK 681- Advanced Mezzo & Macro Practice SWFI 531- Field II & Simulated Experiences	6.5 CU
Summer 2023	SOWK 730- Migration Dynamics & U.S. Social Policy SOWK 732- Migration, Social Justice, & Human Rights	6 CU
Fall 2023	SOWK 731- Social Work Practice with Refugees & Immigrants SWFI 630- Field Instruction III & Simulated Experiences SWFI 630s- Integrative Seminar	4.5 CU
Spring 2023	SOWK 632- Social Work Practice with Older Adults SOWK 621- Treatment in Addictions SWFI 631- Field Instruction IV & Simulated Experiences	3.5 CU

The restructuring of the curriculum allows for breaks in between semesters, and in addition, students can begin their field internship during the summer semester to disperse the required hours. This flexibility allows students to plan out their schedule around their various responsibilities. Students in the advanced standing cohort begin coursework in the spring semester and start their internship during the fall semester (See Table 2).

Table 2. *Advanced Standing Curriculum Structure*

Semester	Classes	Credits
Spring 2023	SOWK 680- Advanced Clinical Practice SOWK 681- Advanced Mezzo & Macro Practice	6 CU
Summer 2023	SOWK 730- Migration Dynamics and U.S. Social Policy SOWK 732- Migration, Social Justice, & Human Rights	6 CU
Fall 2023	SOWK 731- Social Work Practice with Refugees & Immigrants SWFI 630- Field Instruction III & Simulated Experiences SWFI 630s- Integrative Seminar	4.5 CU
Spring 2023	SOWK 632- Social Work Practice with Older Adults SOWK 621- Treatment in Addictions SWFI 631- Field Instruction IV & Simulated Experiences	3.5 CU

The reduction of courses through the shift to the new curriculum allowed an opportunity to eliminate the OBMSW original curriculum carousel model. Within the carousel model, students were expected to take three courses per semester, one 15-week

course and two 7.5-week courses. Although the carousel model was initially thought to be a good fit for the OBMSW program, there were a few unintended consequences that created stress among students and faculty. For example, the model did not allow for students and instructors to have breaks between semesters, since students were expected to enroll in the summer semesters after the end of the spring semester. Students found themselves having to prepare for the following semester while still finishing the current semester. Students expressed feeling burned out due to the lack of breaks between semesters.

Evaluation Methodology and Preliminary Results

The subsequent section presents several preliminary results of an internal initial process and outcome evaluation of the OBMSW, along with anecdotal evidence regarding more recent shifts within the program. The process evaluation was conducted in the program's first year (AY 2018-2019), and the outcome evaluation was conducted in the program's second year. The evaluation employed a mixed methods design with primary (e.g., online surveys and focus groups) and secondary sources (e.g., student self-assessments). Survey and focus group samples included faculty, staff, and student respondents. Questions for the survey and the focus groups were developed with the input and collaboration of all OBMSW program staff and faculty.

Seven focus groups were conducted with students from four separate cohort groups to include first- and second-year students, and advanced-standing students. A total of 18 participants were included in the sample. All focus group participants were women and 17 identified as Latinx. Most indicated that they were employed full-time and attended to family responsibilities as they worked to complete the courses and internship components of the program. Focus groups lasted between 60 and 90 minutes and were conducted in English and Spanish. A semi-structured interview guide was used to inquire about students' experiences within the OBMSW program, as well as to ask about suggestions to improve the program. Open discussions were encouraged by the focus group facilitators. The groups were conducted, transcribed, and analyzed by two Latinx and bilingual (English-Spanish) researchers; one was a faculty member of LUC-SSW and the other a doctoral student within LUC-SSW. Focus group data were coded by each researcher separately and consensus discussions were used to gain agreement.

Part of the process and outcome evaluation included a voluntary, brief online student survey intended to understand more about the recruitment application process of the OBMSW program. For example, one question asked students how they found out about the OBMSW program and another asked if the program's website provided useful information about the application process. The survey included seven questions; 3 items were multiple choice, two items were a five-point Likert scale, one item used ranking questions, and one question was open-ended. Most items provided the option of providing more details to the selected response. Thirty-nine of the OBMSW program students agreed to participate in the survey portion of the research study, with 16 participants identifying themselves as first-year students, 16 as second-year students, and six as advanced-standing students; one respondent did not identify their class standing. The response rate reached 62% of the total number of enrolled OBMSW students.

In addition, there were two rounds of faculty and staff focus groups. The first was conducted at the end of Spring 2019 and included nine participants in teaching, admissions, advising, field education, instructional design, and administration. The second round of focus groups took place from December 2020 to January 2021. Three focus groups were conducted with OBMSW full-time and adjunct faculty, which were comprised of five women and one man. The focus groups used semi-structured interview guides, lasted approximately one hour and were conducted virtually using the Zoom video conferencing platform and an interview guide. The focus groups were recorded and transcribed. The focus groups were conducted by a Latinx bilingual (English-Spanish) OBMSW research assistant and a Latinx bilingual (English-Spanish) faculty member that does not teach in the OBMSW program. A thematic analysis of the focus group transcripts and interview notes was done with the assistance of DeDoose, a secure web-based qualitative data analysis platform.

Enrollment and Graduation Rates

In terms of enrollment, the program launched in the fall of 2018 and, even though enrollment goals were not accomplished in the first year of the program, progress has been made since the inaugural year. Whereas in fall 2018 the program commenced with ten students, in fall 2021 the total enrollment increased to 44 students (See Table 3). Since the program started, a total of four students (one from fall 2018 and three from fall 2021) have left the program due to academic dismissals. A total of six students have discontinued the program for other reasons (one from fall 2018, one from fall 2019, and four from fall 2021). The cohort that started in fall 2019 had two students who took a leave of absence, returned to the program and will now graduate with the fall 2020 cohort.

Table 3. *OBMSW Student Enrollment and Graduation Numbers*

Academic Semester	Number of Students	
	Enrolled	Graduated
Fall 2018	10	8
Fall 2019	24	21
Spring 2020 Advanced Standing	13	13
Fall 2020	19	19 ^a
Spring 2021 Advanced Standing	10	10
Fall 2021	44	37 ^b

^a Students currently active in program with expected Spring 2023 graduation.

^b Students currently active in a program with expected Spring 2024 graduation.

Program Strengths Per Students

Student surveys, self-assessments, and focus groups identified various program characteristics that influenced student interest in this MSW program, as well as program strengths that students experienced. The student survey conducted in the fall of 2020 revealed that the program's advertised flexibility to adapt to "non-traditional"/full-time working students as one of the important reasons participants applied to the program. As noted by survey respondents, this was a key factor as most students work full-time and/or

are caregivers. Similarly, the student self-assessments highlighted the convenience of the online format as a positive factor in facilitating a balance in the various roles and responsibilities that students hold. The following quotes, the first from the self-assessments and the second from a focus group, underscore the online format provision of increased access, flexibility, and opportunities to build networks and relationships.

It was very helpful in the sense that I did not have to stress [about] traveling across the city from work to the university to attend a class. This was really important because it allowed me to commit more time to the readings and attending the synchronous session.

I think they're really able to execute an online piece...so that we're not just like people from around the world taking the same program, but we actually get to know each other. And we actually get to network and build those relationships with people that have the same values and the same goals, same professional goals. So, I think the online piece is good.

The self-assessments positively rated the curriculum content and learning, and students reported being pleased with the theoretical knowledge they were acquiring, with the opportunities of learning from each other and by the opportunities to clarify concepts with professors during the synchronous sessions. During the focus groups, students indicated that the program instructors were knowledgeable and experienced. Students shared that they valued the variation of teaching modalities implemented by some professors.

I think the professors are phenomenal. I absolutely love it. I think it's amazing. They all have different backgrounds; they all have a lot of experience. They know what they're talking about, they're great.

The strength I think that, you know, even [administrator] included, the professors are very, very knowledgeable. I feel like we are learning a lot and they're great.

Another positive that was emphasized by some students was the bilingual attribute of the program. The following quote highlights a student's personal connection as a Spanish-speaking Latinx student with the program's bilingual aspect.

I understand we are in this country and everything we do, our daily work, including the documentation we prepare, must be in English. Yet, as a Hispanic student, as a Latina, it is very important for me to have that connection with the social work profession in my own language.

Linked to the bilingual feature of the program is the focus on Latinx populations. In the student survey, the Latinx focus of the program was identified as the third most important program characteristic that influenced students' decision to apply to the program. This characteristic was only surpassed by the program's bilingual aspect and its online format.

Importantly, several students who participated in the focus groups expressed that the mental health and migration studies emphases of the program were crucial in making their decision to enroll in the OBMSW. It was identified as a uniqueness that is valued and sought after.

...what made me choose it is that it is focus[ed] on the clinical area, which is a very important area for me, and with a sub-specialization in migration...I think that makes it a different program. And that's the plus of the program, what I think that, for now, at least, in all the universities I tried searching for [and] wasn't there.

Program Challenges Per Students

Areas of improvement and program challenges were also identified by students who participated in the survey and focus groups. Various students shared that a big challenge was the difficulty for the program to adapt to student schedules and realities, even though the program advertised itself as one designed for “non-traditional” students. Students asked that the program provide more communication and clarity regarding the program requirements and structure prior to enrollment, as well as more flexibility provided for current students.

Like we have to complete a minimum of 23-24 hours for a second level internship. Like who's going to be able to work 40 hours at a full-time job and then 23 more hours on top of that? Those are things that can be challenging. Like, we're still going to do them, but I would have liked to be aware of that prior.

Another challenge and area of consideration raised by students from the first cohort was the Spanish language dominance in the courses. Students shared that they thought the program would have more of a balance between English and Spanish because it was advertised as a *bilingual* program. Various students expressed the need to include more English within the program, especially since internship sites and workplaces require social workers to communicate and complete documentation in English.

However, I feel there should be more English. Because in the field I'm going to work with the Latinx population, but all the processes I'm going to do will be in English. I do feel that the master's should have that balance.

The fieldwork component of the program was determined to be a key area for improvement by students. Student comments indicated that the original organization of the field component of the program was understaffed, and they did not feel supported to meet some of their needs. The expectation for students to secure two different field site options was particularly challenging.

And another thing I would like to see is more support throughout the internship process. Basically, I had to...I knew coming in that I would have to do most of the research and find these locations and opportunities...I didn't feel much support in that aspect.

Well, I think that [Loyola University Chicago] could add more administrative staff because [internship staff] I do not think she suffices...It's something [Loyola University Chicago] has to also consider- the staffing...I think that affected me a lot and I know it affected other peers more.

Program Strengths and Challenges Per Faculty and Staff

Faculty and staff perception of the OBMSW has generally been positive. The first focus group with faculty and staff members directly involved with the program was conducted at the end of the spring 2019 semester and other focus groups were conducted in December 2020 through January 2021. Some program strengths identified were the target student population, the bilingual and bicultural professors, and the appreciation of teamwork within the program.

I think our quality of students. I think sometimes people think that people who are older, who come into a program like this, whose first language might be Spanish might be at a disadvantage, but I find that they bring some life experiences and some work experiences that are way beyond what some of the students in other programs have.

We saw cultural differences. And there are others whose parents are from Latin America, but they received their education here [and] are completely bilingual. Having those two perspectives is very important because the students will be that way- they will be a combination of the two and that has helped a lot.

I think another strength is that we have worked as a team and that has allowed that the quality of our program be better because it isn't one person's idea but, instead, we have tried to have a conversation regarding all the decisions.

Several program challenges were also identified through the focus groups. Challenges included access to financial aid and scholarship opportunities, especially for those students who might be undocumented, and the university's structural and administrative barriers that specifically impact potential OBMSW students.

If they don't qualify for financial aid...the vast majority of our students are going to be students that perhaps don't have papers, and so then not being able to apply for financial aid. Then that can be a big detriment to the service...I think for me the major weakness right now is the cost to go to this program.

So, the type of population that may be interested in our program is people who, in many cases, have received their undergraduate studies in Latin America and that is where the difficulties arise...So Graduate Professional Enrollment Management has said, if the original transcripts are not sealed, even if the person submits a photocopy, as it is somewhat informal, it cannot be accepted even conditionally. So even if it is a general rule of the whole university, it impacts the students of our program more.

Student Feedback and New Leadership

Student advocacy, initial process and outcome evaluation reports, and the transition to new leadership were the impetus that sparked the implementation of OBMSW program reforms. The current Online Bilingual MSW director, hired in July 2021, facilitated a series of meet-and-greet virtual group sessions and held several one-on-one meetings with OBMSW program students from two different cohorts. A list of proposed changes to

restructure the model was brought to the OBMSW faculty/staff committee, and the committee voted to make the programmatic changes. Data collected from student meetings and the report of the OBMSW program drove the decision to eliminate the carousel model, and a new course schedule was adopted. Another significant programmatic change was the move to align the OBMSW program to the face-to-face MSW program calendar to allow OBMSW students to take breaks during holidays.

Another theme that emerged in the student meetings with the OBMSW director was the need to institutionalize a system or structure for continuous student and program administration communication, feedback, and response. Therefore, the OBMSW program committee voted to recruit an OBMSW Committee Student Representative to participate in the monthly committee meetings. Additionally, the OBMSW program director teamed up with the assistant director of field education and held monthly listening sessions with all the OBMSW program cohorts. These new methods of communicating and hearing students instituted by the OBMSW director will play a crucial role for making necessary changes to the program moving forward.

Limitations

There are various limitations to this program evaluation that should be considered. Due to the timing of the evaluation and the OBMSW still being in its initial stages, the preliminary findings presented are based on a small sample. The evaluation only captured information from the first and second year of the program and would benefit from a longitudinal study of short and long-term program outcomes that include alumni. Additionally, all the changes that have been implemented are new and only anecdotal evidence has been reported.

Implications for Social Work

The recent influx of immigrants and refugees from Central and South American countries into major urban cities in the U.S. has created what some community leaders and politicians call a humanitarian crisis (Bosman, 2023). Innovative solutions are necessary to solve the crisis and the innovative curriculum of the OBMSW program aims to prepare the next generation of bilingual social workers to tackle this critical juncture. In addition, the curriculum focus of the OBMSW program on micro practice and migration studies can serve as a model for other social work programs across the U.S.

Discussion and Conclusion

The preliminary results of the process and outcome evaluation of the Online Bilingual MSW program provide some evidence in support of its ability to meet the mission of increasing access to quality graduate social work education for Latinx students. The OBMSW program addresses some of the challenges to entry and completion by providing a bilingual online format with culturally relevant curriculum, student support, mentorship opportunities, and discounted tuition. The program has also demonstrated initial success in promoting student capacity development for providing culturally and linguistically

relevant mental health services for Latinx immigrant and refugee populations and increasing the number of MSW-trained bilingual/bicultural practitioners.

In the three years of the program's existence, 52 students have graduated with an MSW and enrollments have grown with each year. The number of students enrolling in the program and the number of graduates from the program in its initial years have demonstrated promise for continued growth in the number of graduate-level social workers who are Spanish-English bilingual/bicultural and have relevant training for mental health practice with immigrants and refugees. Furthermore, the program demonstrated a very strong retention-to-completion rate with only three students leaving the program before completion for the cohort groups that have completed the full program cycle. This represents a 94 percent completion rate. Some of the evaluation data suggests that the program's Latinx faculty may have contributed to this high retention and completion rate, as student comments make reference to the relevance to faculty members' lines of research and areas of practice, as well as their sensitivity to language, culture, and the social realities of the Latinx and immigrant communities.

The evaluation provided evidence that the online format of the program increased access, while not compromising the rigor and quality of the program. While the increased access was important for individual students' ability to participate in the program, it also has the potential to impact access to care in underserved communities, such as rural areas or new immigrant destination states and local communities that do not have a history and infrastructure to meet the needs of immigrant and refugee communities. While over time this may make a significant contribution towards addressing the need for Spanish language and immigrant community service and workforce capacity development, it has also posed a challenge for the program in securing relevant local field placements.

Despite the many merits and successes of the program, challenges and barriers remain, such as the prohibitive cost of the program and the insufficient/lack of financial aid for OBMSW students, particularly undocumented students. While cost continues to be a barrier, some advances have been made. For example, the program cost is heavily discounted by the university (30% lower cost than the other MSW options offered by the school); the reduction in credit hours to complete the programs represents tuition savings, and school-based scholarships are now available to OBMSW students. Another challenge for the program is to calibrate the bilingual nature of the program to provide more targeted support for students who wish to improve their English, as well as for those who wish to improve their Spanish fluency. The program must prepare all students for the realities of the field that require fluency in Spanish to work with clients and fluency in English for documentation and licensing purposes.

Loyola University Chicago, the School of Social Work, and the OBMSW program faculty and staff are dedicated to the full realization of the mission and goals of the program. Towards that end, the barriers and challenges will continue to be addressed, and the program will continue to be refined with student representation and feedback, as well as dedicated resources for ongoing program evaluation and student assessment.

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Disclosure Statement

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