

Attitudes of Employers toward Online Education of Social Workers

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Abstract

A considerable amount of anecdotal evidence has suggested that social service agency directors have a level of suspicion toward online education for social work practitioners they might be considering hiring. To assess the validity of anecdotal comments, a systematic survey was conducted to assess attitudes toward online education by executive directors of social services agencies in North Carolina. In concert with the North Carolina Association of County Departments of Social Services (NCACDSS), all county directors of Departments of Social Services (DSS) in North Carolina were sent questionnaires assessing attitudes toward online education of social work employees. Because the topic has become controversial, *every* DSS director responded to the questionnaire. The data confirms the suspiciousness found in the anecdotal evidence. Most remarkable is the absence of statistical significance in identifying demographic variables that would be expected to predict attitudes toward online education of social workers. There are strong implications for social work education contained in the results of the study.

Introduction

Even though the number of accredited BSW programs and MSW programs are growing [CSWE.ORG], a considerable amount of anecdotal evidence suggests that there is a level of suspicion directed toward online education among those who hire social workers. Although the suspicion is unsubstantiated and cannot be used to draw an inference, apparently employers are inferring that online education is somewhat inferior to face to face education. Data exists (as noted in our review of literature) on employers' attitudes toward online education of staff they hire. There are strong implications for social work education as a result of our review of the general literature and from the findings of our survey. Since, in our search for literature in the library databases addressing attitudes toward hiring social workers with online education, no survey research was found. As a result, we decided to distribute a survey to those who routinely hire social workers and uncover their attitudes toward hiring social workers with online educations.

The wide diversity among those who hire social workers can be a confounding factor in understanding any causal feature related to online education. Under these circumstances, it is

best for the sample to be as homogeneous as possible. Thus, we concluded it would be best to collect a sample of agency directors who shared the identical mission and regulations. Each of the 100 counties in North Carolina operates under an identical mission and under the same state/federal regulations. In addition, the North Carolina Association of County Departments of Social Services had expressed an interest in the attitudes toward online education among their membership.

As with the general literature on attitudes toward online education, demographic variables proved to demonstrate *no* statistical significance in uncovering attitude patterns in the survey results. For example, one might think that those who have had experiences with online education might hold positive attitudes toward it. No such pattern was uncovered. Fogle and Elliott (2013) had uncovered similar findings. In fact, no demographic variable proved to be significant in predicting a positive or negative attitude. Our research is a snapshot and can be used as a baseline for continuing research in the arena of attitudes toward online education for social workers.

Review of Literature

The recognition of online degrees by some hiring managers has been moving in the direction of acceptance, as indicated by an important recent empirical study. Research collected in 2005 from Eduventures' Continuing and Professional Education found that of a total of 505 employers, nearly 60% value online education and hire graduates with online degrees (Nance, 2007). This study is important because of its large sample size and high return rate. However, other studies did not reflect the same result. When Adams and Defleur (2005) compared candidates with traditional, face-to-face degrees with candidates with online degrees, even though both groups of candidates had had similar experience, recommendations and evaluations, they found that "the faculty candidate with a fully online doctorate was the preferred choice of only 2% of the respondents whereas the faculty candidate with the hybrid doctorate was the preferred choice of only 11% of the respondents (Linardopoulos, 2012)." The acceptance of hybrid and fully online degrees was significantly lower when compared to traditional face-to-face degrees. This result conflicts with the results described in Eduventures' Continuing and Professional Education report (Nance, 2007). Trierweiler and Rivera conducted a study that revealed that over half of the executives surveyed believed that online higher education was of less value when compared to traditionally based programs (Metrejean & Noland, 2011). Online degrees at this time are generally less accepted by employers, according to a number of studies including the ones reviewed above, although at least one major study revealed the pendulum to be shifting in the direction of acceptance.

Online degree programs have been accused of being less effective than traditional in-class settings in helping students gain problem-solving skills, social skills, and additional developmental skills. For example, in comparing an online course to the same course taught face-to-face, Marson, Wei, and Marson (2010) found that the face-to-face students were better problem solvers. According to Columbaro and Monaghan (2009), employers' concerns with online degrees include: "not enough academic rigor, not enough face-to face interaction, more

risk of cheating, relationship of diploma mills, and perceived lack of commitment due to not being willing to come to campus” (Linardopoulos, 2012). The employers surveyed also stated that social skills as well as integrity were highly valued when looking for candidates to hire and they were concerned that these could not be taught or measured in online education. Ervin states “We’re talking about the human asset here. The human being likes communications” (Carnevale, 2007). This comment implies that the perceived risk that arises from online education is that individuals will lack certain communication skills that could conceivably be an issue in team work situations. However, the authors found no research that supports this belief. There is also the perceived issue that a student is to some extent “purchasing” a degree because although payment is submitted for online classes, they are often delivered without face-to-face interaction. Guzman summed up this viewpoint when he stated that non-traditional or online degrees are not of the same value as traditional degrees “because it’s almost like you are purchasing the degree received online” (Carnevale, 2007).

In spite of the comments shared above, the authors believe that employers do value applicants who possess skills obtained through higher education, including online education. The exploration of the importance of those skills obtained is reviewed below. According to Harvey as cited in Silva, Lourtie, and Aires (2013)

higher education must be able to i) establish close links with employers, assisting them in identifying and adopting new strategies suited for overcoming any lack of qualifications; ii) contribute with solutions for education and training in high-skilled areas with a low number of workers; iii) prepare graduates with effective working skills, ensuring that the employability requirements are explicit in the study programmers (p. 109).

Silva, Lourtie, and Aires (2013) contend that higher learning should not be judged based on where it was received but on the skills demonstrated by employees. The university is charged with the responsibility for teaching employability skills, and the focus is on how universities can achieve that goal. The way to ensure that the skills employers demand are acquired while attending a college or university is to embed these skills throughout the curriculum (Silva, Lourtie and Aires, 2013). A study in which students and teachers were asked to rank 10 employer-required skills taught in the classroom was conducted. There was no significant statistical difference between teachers and students on the ranking of the 10 embedded skills. Nearly 91% of the students felt employability skills should be embedded into the curriculum; 82% of the teacher sample implied that employability skills were being taught; and nearly 91% agreed that the skills should be taught within the course. In reference to the research presented, teachers or professors were preparing nontraditional students as well as traditional students for the workforce.

Employers said they also look at the reputation and accreditation status of the educational institution to determine the value of the degree awarded. The reputation and quality of the institution are more important than whether the degree is delivered online or face-to-face. Adams notes that when a student earns an online degree from a well-known educational traditional institution known for delivering face-to-face degrees, the employer assumes that the

student received a traditional face-to-face degree even when the student in fact received a degree delivered online (Carnevale, 2005). Employers tend to have more negative perceptions of online degrees if they are aware of criticisms directed towards the quality of an institution's student preparation or its graduates or if the institution is geographically distant from the employer (Amaro & Fitzgerald, 2009).

Adams and DeFluer (2005) conducted research that assessed employers and their thoughts on hiring candidates with online degrees versus traditional ones. Employers were asked to answer the statement: "the type of college or university from which the applicant obtained his or her degree would be of no importance as a hiring criterion in our organization" (Carnevale, 2005). The study indicated that nearly 75% disagreed with that statement (Carnevale, 2005). One can assume that the institution from which the degree was received and how the degree was received has a significant impact on the employability of a candidate.

As technology continues to grow and become more and more popular among the current generation, it can be assumed that the acceptance of online degrees is rising among employers as well. As cited in Nance (2007), the *Professional Education Report* indicated that out of 505 employers nearly 60% favor the employment of individuals who have received online degrees. The report also indicated that most employers value online degrees and traditional degrees equally. However, less than 50% of students are utilizing online programs that offer degrees (Nance, 2007). It appears that although online degrees are gradually gaining acceptance, students still prefer traditional degrees for reasons that have not been explored in this study.

Many of the studies other than the *Professional Education Report* discussed within the current paper had limitations because of low levels of participants. As cited in Carnevale (2005), Adams sent 1,285 questionnaires to companies and only 269 of the recipients responded. Since the number of participants was extremely low, it is not possible to generalize from the results (Carnevale, 2005). However, the information still sheds some light on the responding employers' attitudes towards online degrees. The limitations for the studies discussed were sample size and the prior bias of participants against online degrees. Limitations were similar for this study.

It is suggested that an employer who has received a traditional degree with no online course work may not understand the rigor associated with obtaining an online degree. Therefore, such employer may have a bias against online degreed job applicants and not hire them. It is also seems possible that employers who have received online degrees may be biased in favor of hiring applicants with online degrees.

Sample and Questionnaire

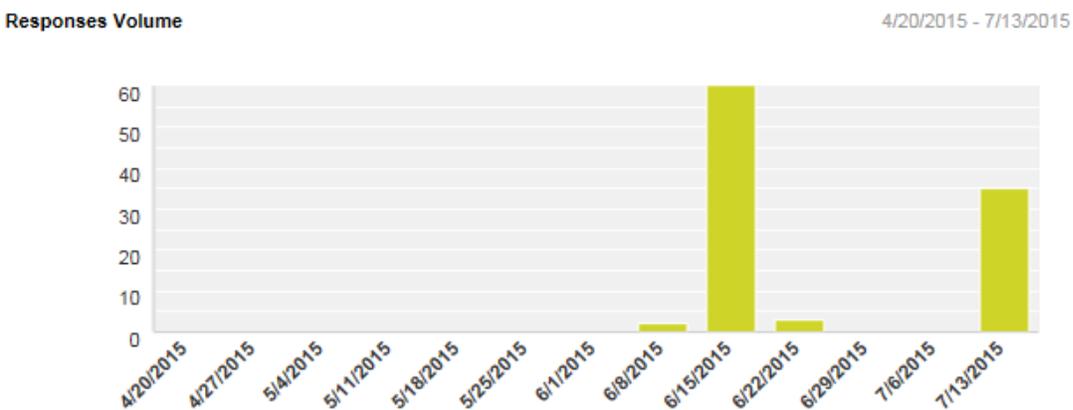
The items found in the questionnaire emerged from the review of literature, Saxon's (2008) work recommendations from the officers of the NCACDSS and the Baccalaureate Program Directions Association (BPD) Technology Committee. In addition, the work of Fogle and Elliott (2013) served as our model. It is important to note that hiring for the Departments of Social Services is not done through a statewide merit system application but by each county

executive director. This has the potential to provide wide variation in the credentials of persons hired in county worker positions.

Once the first draft of the questionnaire based on the review of literature was created, the members of the BPD Technology Committee were used for field testing the survey. With the assistance of the committee the authors fine-tuned and edited problems that were found. In addition, the Technology Committee set a completion time of four to five minutes for the questionnaire. Having an estimate of required time was critical because the subjects of this research have high-stress professional positions and very little spare time to spend on nonjob-required activities. In order to acquire a sample of an adequate size, it was important to state upfront the amount of time it would take to complete the questionnaire. Two officers of NCACDSS also made recommendations for changes, which were implemented.

As illustrated in Figure 1, the field testing was completed between April 20, 2015, and June 1, 2015. Beginning on June 8, the questionnaire was open to the subjects. Within three days, 60% of the population replied. The general rule of thumb for the collection of data from a small non-random sample is to secure a sample size of 80% of the population ($n=100$). As a result, we made a request to have 15 more directors complete the questionnaire. By July 13, all of the DSS directors had completed it, underscoring the importance of the research to this group.

Figure 1



There were two reasons for the high response rate. As the authors understood at the onset, members of NCACDSS have a vested interest in hiring the best employees possible. The membership has also explicitly expressed interest in learning more about issues of online education and training of social workers. Our research team believes that the high response rate is related to the intense interest that the NCACDSS membership has in online education and training. In addition, the authors believed that DSS directors are so busy that many of them would ask a designated staff member to complete the questionnaire. The data indicates that not a single designee completed the questionnaire. All questionnaires were completed by executive directors. The absence of staff stand-ins completing the questionnaires is an indicator of the importance of the topic to the directors.

Results

The results are divided into two sections: qualitative and quantitative. In the survey an open-ended question was asked: “Do you have additional comments?” A quantitative analysis was performed on the substantive items (see Appendix A). The questionnaire can be found in Appendix B.

Qualitative Analysis

Fourteen directors spent the additional time and effort necessary to share their comments in regard to their willingness to hire social workers who had received their degrees from programs that were offered online to a greater or lesser extent. From the depth and thoughtfulness of their comments, it was obvious that these directors considered online education an important issue.

The comments fell naturally into three categories: those favoring online education for social work, those reflecting reservations about online education for social work, and those reflecting the belief that online education is not appropriate for the education of social workers. Most of the directors accepted that a preponderance of social work education degrees today contain some online courses, but those who had reservations about online classes in social work education largely had reservations in particular about practice classes taught online. Many of the directors also did not understand that field practicum generally is not carried out online but is taught with the student working with clients in a real world agency setting, not in a virtual agency.

It is interesting that the comments of these directors about online practice classes mirrored those of social work educators in a survey carried out by Vernon et al, 2009. There was some conflict between what these educators believed and what they actually did, since many of the same social work educators who did not believe that practice classes should be taught online taught one or more practice classes online themselves.

Some of the comments favorable toward online social work education are reflected below. One director stated “If the degree carries all appropriate accreditations, then they should not be seen as less rigorous or less of a degree.” Another director made an astute comment “Online is not different from classroom setting. Same cost, same information, and to me more work with online is involved. You have to be engaged and participate fully with online.” Another director reflected the pragmatic reality of working in a rural area. “Distant [sic] learning is a great opportunity for those individuals in rural communities that desire a college education.” Another said “While I do not at all discount online degrees, I strongly believe that interpersonal skills must be present no matter how the degree is obtained.” This comment reflected the view of most of the directors who commented. A similar comment was made by still another director: “I realize that many traditional colleges offer quite a few classes online and I don’t think it makes a difference.”

One director indicated that he is aware of trends in higher education and the evolving nature of online learning in the following prescient comment: “I fully support on-line learning and I believe at some point in the very near future as technology evolves, that it will fully catch up with classroom learning but at this point I do not believe it has reached that point yet.” He

added that “some of the best learning” for him in his MSW program was in the role-play sessions that were “real time and highly interactive.” “I am not aware of an on-line process which could be as real time interactive.”

Another director pointed out “however, as technology has evolved, the face to face interaction of on-line studies is improving.” He continued

I do feel that some courses need to be in person. Field work and internships are for the experience and the university involvement in check-in and discussion. If there are means for video conferencing, this could be accomplished on-line. Interviewing/counseling is part talking part body language and that should remain in person.

This director astutely demonstrated his awareness that online learning has developed tools that mirror the best of face-to-face learning.

While favorably inclined toward online learning, another commenter is not as sure. I believe online education has its place but am not sure it is a full substitute for the classroom and field placement that is needed within Social Work education. However, we must be willing to adapt to a changing environment regarding how education is delivered.

One director stated his reservations clearly even as he accepted that social work education is increasingly moving online. “On-line degrees might do well for some professions and I have no objection to on-line courses as a part of the degree.” And he delivers his reservations. “But I would scrutinize the courses that were on-line, such as Social Work theory and practice classes, before I interviewed.”

One director’s comment was particularly in favor of hybrid learning.

My general option is a mixture of online and classroom is best. The discussion can occur online, but I am still struggling to make the transition to pure online. I do not believe field placement can be online.

He continued with some general comments that reflect his understanding of the nature of the world of the world of social work education.

The quality/rigor of the coursework can vary between institutions even with traditional schools and with the students themselves. I do believe there is a role [for online education in social work] and that it allows students options.

Another respondent spoke to the quality of the experience of employees who obtained an online degree after coming to work for him, pointing out that most did not evaluate their experience highly. However, he also pointed out “in none of them I have seen a thirst for knowledge.” He also asked an important question. “What is the most effective hybrid model of online and on-campus to produce an adequate pool of qualified social workers?”

Only one director was totally negative about online learning.

I would not want to go to a doctor, physical therapist, or even barber who did not have the benefit of an in-person learning experience. The context of social work education is as important as the content.

One director stated that he was “not very informed about online education.” He also pointed out that some degrees are offered “through for-profit entities and that sometimes accreditation is an issue.”

The authors learned a good deal from the comments by the agency directors. Hybrid education was considered by most to be ideal, with a mixture of classes other than practice classes taught online. *De facto*, most of the directors accepted that social work education today is likely to be at least partially online. Most were accepting of the realities of education today, that distance education is here to stay. However one director, while accepting the reality of social work education today, which is “that some social work course work” could “be appropriate for online completion,” emphasized that “by and large the core curriculum of social work would be provided in-person.” This respondent went on to state “and to be honest, an ‘apprentice’ type educational program would even be best [not just an internship at the end of the educational process].” This director really wants the best of present social work education with the best of the past from the origins of the profession.

Three ideas stand out. The first is that most directors have real concerns about virtual field placements, even though no program of which we are aware offers virtual field placements. The second is that social work education has not done a good job of getting across to employers the strengths of online learning and what is and isn’t online education at the present time. The third is that the directors are aware of the pragmatic realities of life for today’s students. There are few full-time students and most work throughout their education. Often they are bound by place and life circumstances as well, thus making online education their best option for a quality education.

One strong implication for social work education on both bachelor’s and master’s levels is that social work education must do a better job of explaining how students in both online courses and degree programs and face-to-face programs gain knowledge, values and skills. Social work educators also need to do a better job of educating employers about the growth in techniques and tools in online education such as Collaborate and Adobe Connect. Social work educators must more thoroughly explain the change in the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) Commission on Accreditation and Commission on Educational Policy [EPAS] standards from input-based to output-based standards. Simply expressed, all students, no matter the modality of their educations, are responsible for achieving the same outcomes in terms of knowledge, skills and values, and if students do not demonstrate the prescribed outcomes, they are not awarded the MSW or the BSW degree.

The directors’ comments were both refreshing and reassuring. Clearly, they are accepting of online social work education while raising legitimate and thoughtful concerns. It

was also impressive how conversant these directors are with the overall picture of the changing world of social work education for practice.

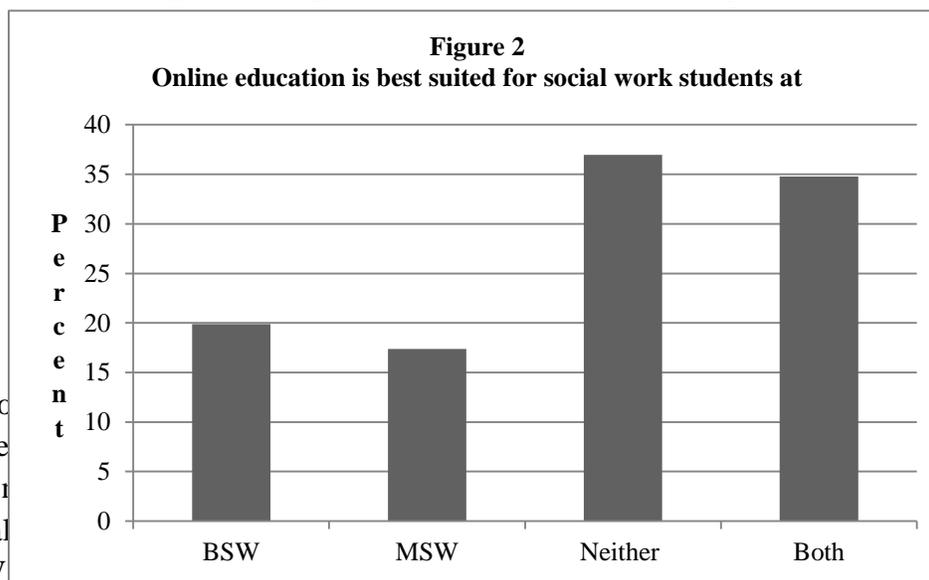
Quantitative Analysis

In examining the review of literature of attitudes toward hiring personnel with online degrees, it is noteworthy to acknowledge that the published material offers no insight into the causal relationships. At first blush, the lack of statistical significance proved frustrating until we examined our data. Within our questionnaire, we include the following demographic items (see Appendix B for more details):

- Sex
- Age
- Years as Director
- Years of Experience
- County's Population (Rural v. Urban)
- Race
- Level of Education
- Experience with online courses

A careful examination of these demographic variables failed to demonstrate an association with any attitudinal variables. Our findings help explain why other researchers have failed to report significant causal relationships. At this point, there appears to be no identifiable cause for attitudes. As a result, each item within our survey will be addressed individually.

It is striking that no significant association between experience with online education and



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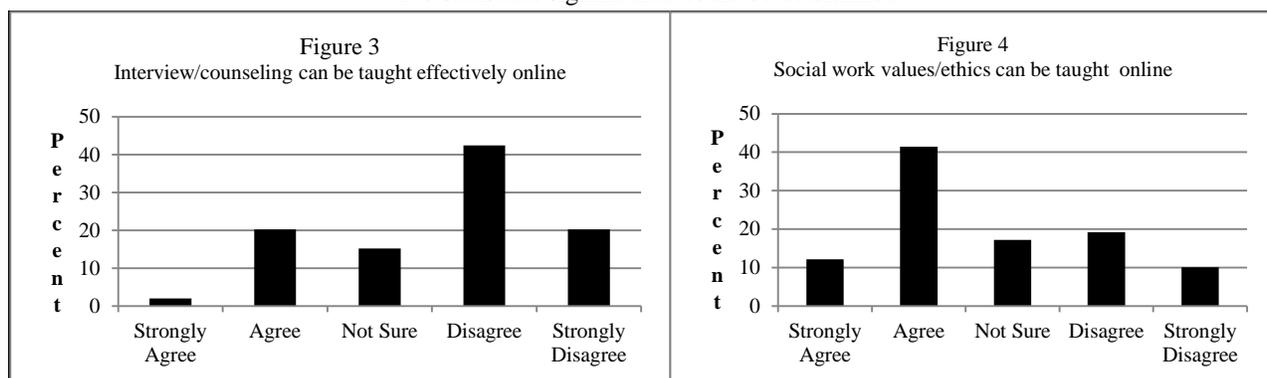
strongest support for online education (32%) came from directors with some online education and the two directors with online degrees. Somewhat paradoxical is the stance on online MSW degrees shown by those with some online education. No director with any online education saw

the MSW as appropriate for online education; whereas directors with no online education saw the online venue as appropriate for the MSW.

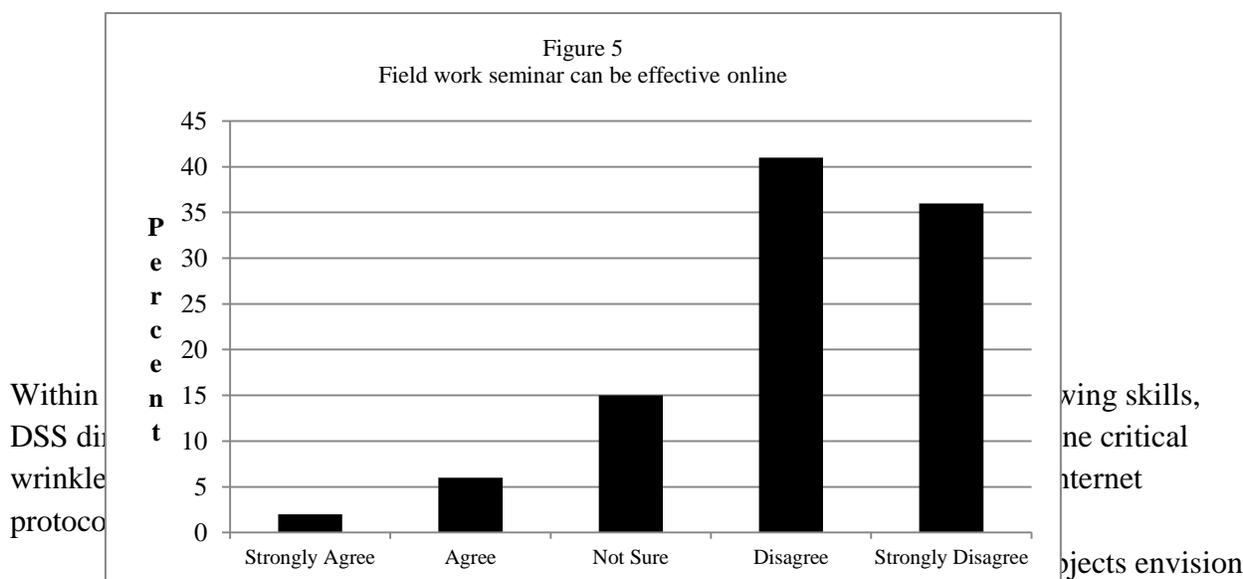
Table 1*

	All Online	Some Online	None Online
BSW	0	11	0
MSW	0	0	15
Both	2	30	0
None	0	0	42

*No statistical significance could be determined

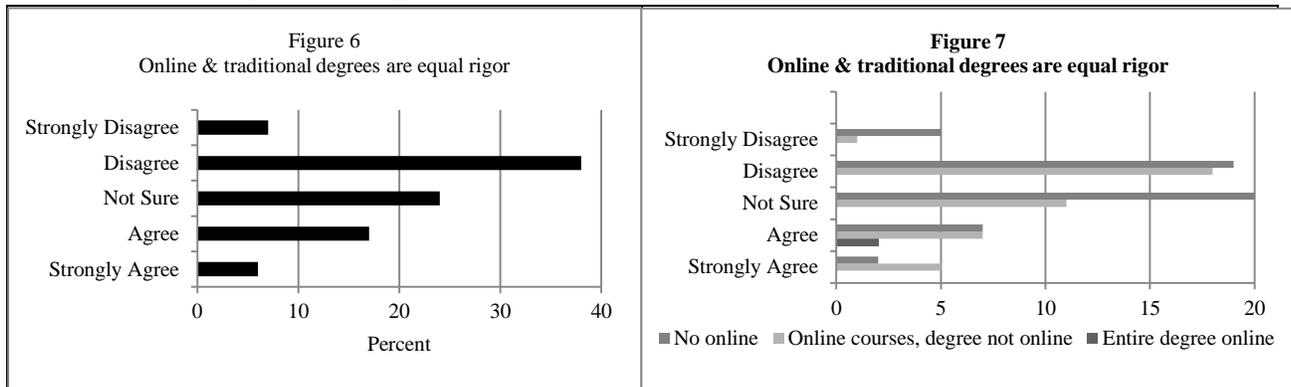


Combined Figures 3, 4 and 5 illuminate the area of educational content. It is clear that DSS directors are highly suspicious of online education when addressing skills like interviewing and counseling. However, addressing the applications of abstract concepts (i.e. values and ethics) provides a more acceptable venue for online education.

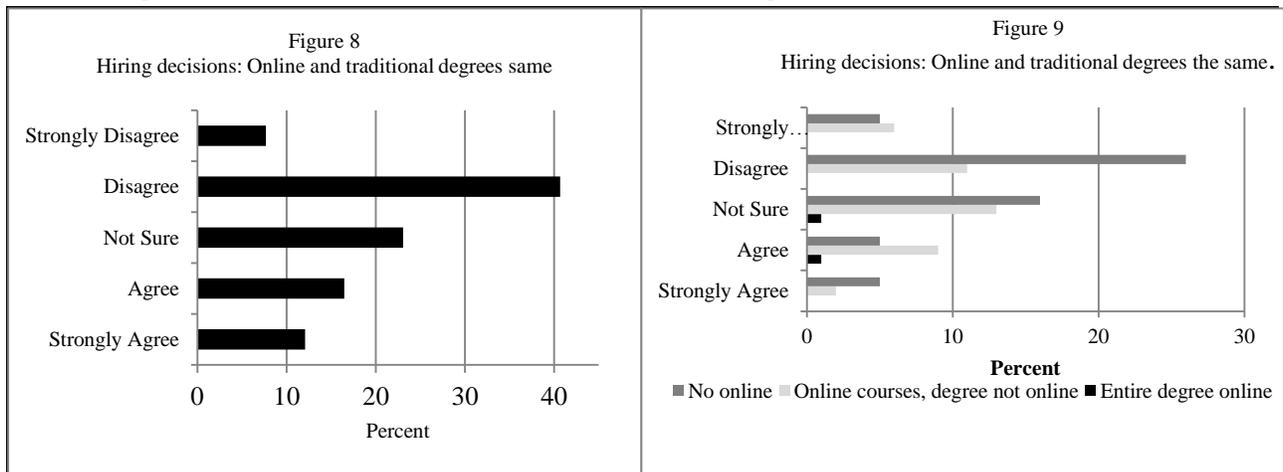


online education as less rigorous (see Figures 6 and 7). Most importantly, the demographic variables did not produce the expected pattern (no statistical significance). The two directors who had online degrees did NOT strongly agree that there was equal rigor. The only subjects

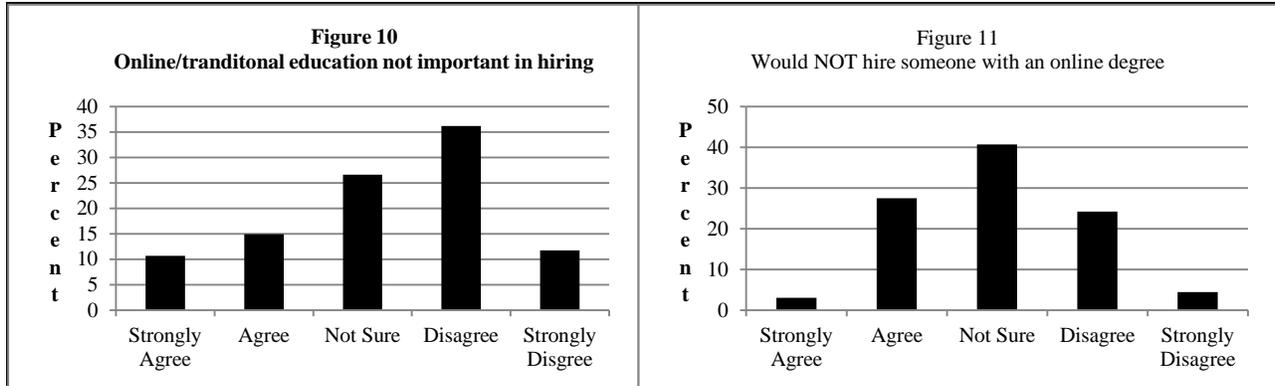
who strongly agreed that the degrees were equal included those with NO online experience and those with some. Thus, the most favorable attitudes toward rigor were subjects with NO online experience and some experience. Both directors who had online degrees were not as sure that the rigor of the methods was equal. As expected those with no experience with online degrees demonstrated the greatest suspiciousness.



In addressing hiring decisions (see Figures 8 and 9), there is a clear indication that those who have no online educational experience are opposed to hiring social workers with online degrees. However, we see a normal distribution of attitudes of hiring online social workers for subjects who have some experience with online education. Surprisingly, the subjects who have online degrees seem reluctant to hire others with online degrees.

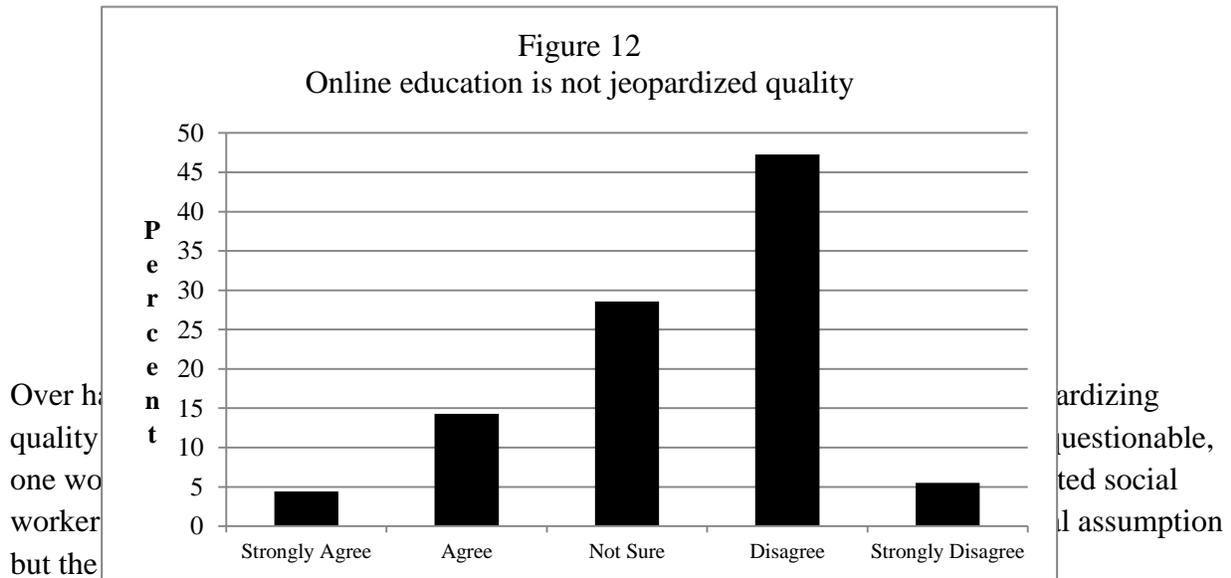


Figures 10 and 11 also address hiring practices. Although 47.87% of DSS directors saw this issue of online education as a critical feature in hiring (clearly a skewed distribution), the willingness to hire someone with an online degree is normally distributed.



One question that we failed to include: Would you promote an employee who obtained a traditional baccalaureate degree, but received an online master’s degree? An unselected response indicated that at least one DSS director would not promote a social worker with an online master’s.

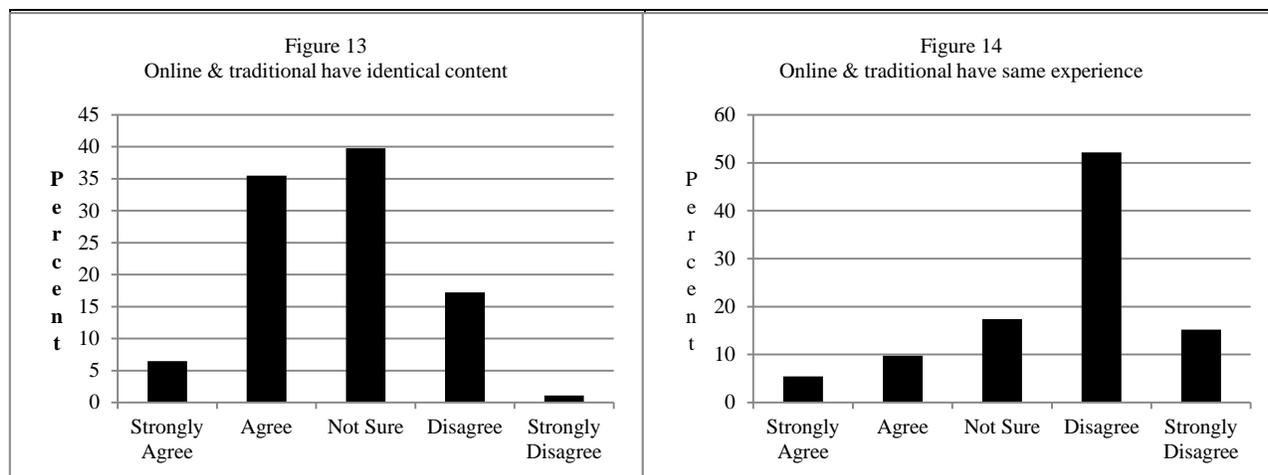
Taken in concert with all the other data collected, Figure 12 produces a contradiction.



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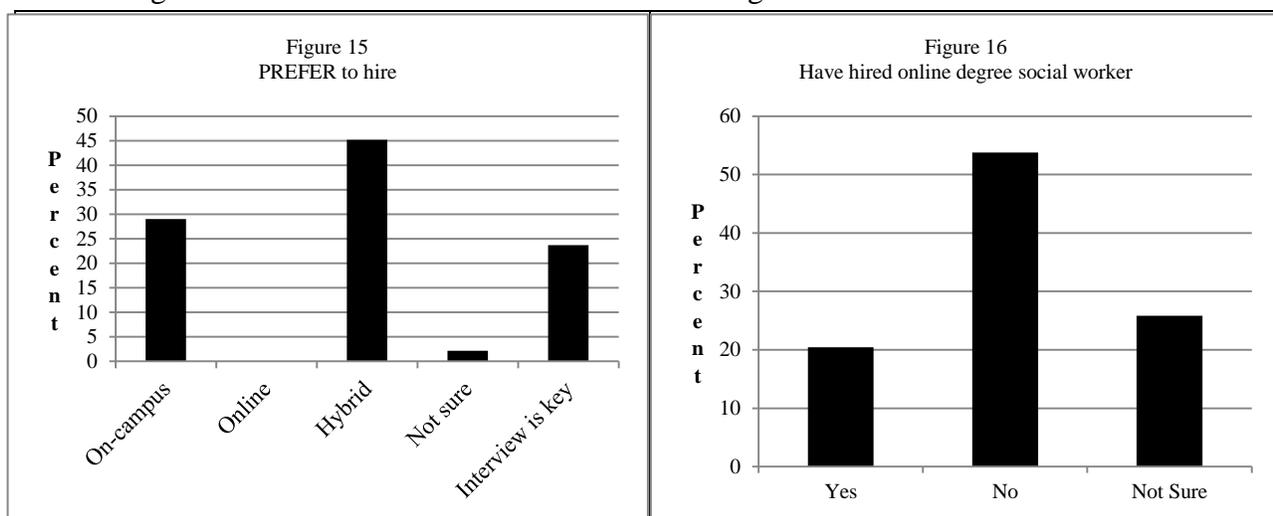
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Another contradiction can be found in the contrast of Figures 13 and 14.



We see a normal distribution when addressing the issue of whether the content of online and traditional venues are identical. We see a skewed distribution when addressing the issue of equal experience. Thus, the directors envision the content of the two venues to be somewhat congruent but the experiences with the learning framework as different.

Figures 15 and 16 address the *real world* of hiring.

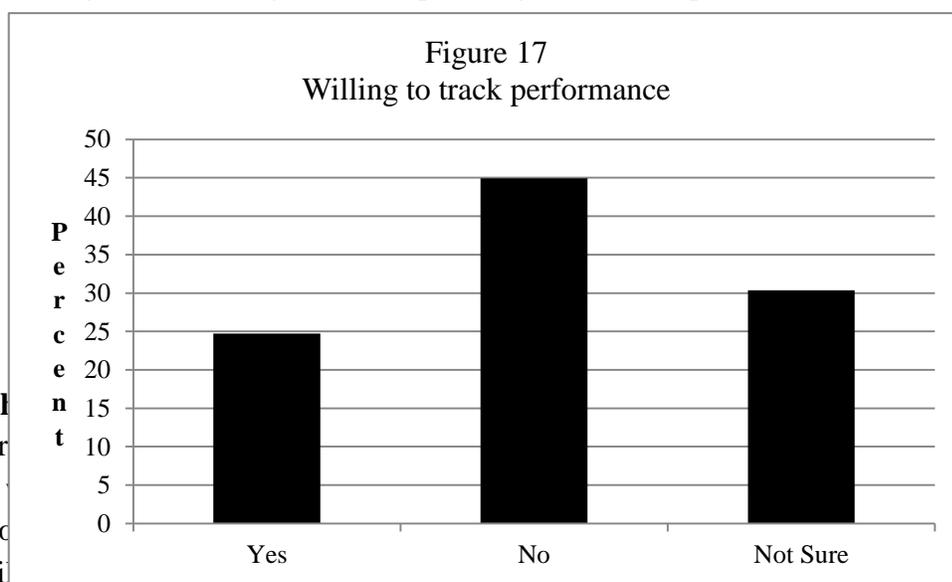


As a personal preference, it is clear that DSS directors see the educational advantages of online learning. However, they also see the problems. Hence, they envision the hybrid venue as the best form of education. Yet, in reality social workers with online degrees are being hired. We cannot identify whether the online social workers were hired because they were the best candidates or were hired because traditionally- educated applicants did not apply. Based on our informal discussions with DSS directors, our best guess is that in some cases online applicants were the best while at other times a position had to be filled quickly.

Recommendations for Further Research

1. A large sample of agency directors who earned an online degree needs to be collected. The attitudes of hiring employees who have online degrees must be assessed. This will offer a clearer picture of attitudes toward online education.

2. The research presented can be used as a baseline. Other researchers are invited to employ our questionnaire. The items produced Cronbach's Alpha coefficient of .84 and a Factor Analysis clearly demonstrated a single measure or factor.
3. The successful completion of social work licensing exams for those who have had an online education must be assessed. Such data will offer the greatest insight into the quality of an online degree.
4. Because universities have an economic vested interest in the success of online education and degrees, it is appropriate for non-university researchers to assess the quality differences between online and traditional venues of education.
5. We must track performance differences between online graduates and traditional graduates. However, most DSS directors were skeptical about making such comparisons. As illustrated in Figure 17, only 25% indicated that they would be willing to do so. Researchers need to construct an instrument that can meaningfully compare the performance of social worker representing the two venues of education. The measurement tool must have respectable levels of validity and reliability. Most importantly, it must be quick to use.



Summary of the
The purpose of this study was to determine the attitudes of social workers toward online education. The variables are not statistically significant. The results are similar to those of other studies.

suggests that with more time, general attitudes are likely to change in the more positive direction. Thus, continuing research in the arena of attitudes toward online education is necessary. We believe we provided a solid foundation for further research. However, unless social work education is prepared to spend time and effort clarifying the rigor of preparation for social work practice in distance learning programs, it will be a long time before distance learning programs are accepted as equivalent.

Implications for Social Work Education

Both the qualitative and quantitative results point to the need for social work education to better inform its constituents about distance learning in social work programs. CSWE, in the area of its website devoted to accreditation, points out "All accredited programs are subject to the

same accreditation standards and review criteria by the Commission on Accreditation, regardless of the curriculum delivery methods used.” The website also lists six BSW programs and 39 MSW programs as distance learning programs although the site explains that this is not a definitive listing. Further, there are more distance learning programs in candidacy.

It was clear from many of the comments in the qualitative section that a number of the directors were not clear about how distance learning is delivered. Some of the comments read as if the content was delivered in the way correspondence courses were delivered in the 1950s utilizing technology instead of the US Postal Service. Social work education must make clear the variety of ways in which content is delivered, ranging from podcasts, to readings, to lectures that are captured on video and delivered. Content also can be delivered synchronously, using Skype and other similar methods. Web cams are now a norm, so it is possible for professors delivering content synchronously to know what is going on with each student since the technology allows students to take part in class discussions at the time the class is in progress. Asynchronously, students discuss with one another and with the professor by way of discussion boards. In both synchronous and asynchronous classes, students take part in group projects and work together on projects and presentations. Class presentations can be done via web cam shifting from one student’s part of the presentation to another. Adobe Connect is another tool that allows the professor to know the student in a way similar to the way in which instructors in face to face classrooms know their students. Finally, at this point no field education is done virtually. Students do face to face internships in their home communities.

To be effective professors, professors are available for office hours, although these are carried out virtually. Students and professors alike can use web cams to see one another. Further, students often use methods like Skype to connect for office hours or apple face time. The result is both professors and students know one another. Professors are able to assess student strengths and weaknesses.

Social work has not made clear to employers how distance education works. This will have to change if we expect social work employers to hire students who are graduates of distance learning programs. As educators we can provide education to the practice community, particularly to employers. We can publicize successful graduates as graduates of our distance learning programs. We can encourage students to share what they are doing in their work toward a degree. We as social work educators need to make it clear that social work, like nursing, education and business, has become part of the 21st century without losing the high touch skills that are a part of our heritage.

Further, social work education should post the results of program assessment. Accreditation according to the 2015 EPAS demands comparative assessment of the different parts of the social work program. If the program is offered through distance learning as well as through bricks and mortar, then a comparative assessment of both modalities must be done and post on the program website. Then we need to publicize the results and discuss the difference if any. Social work educators take responsibility for letting our constituents know what we do and

how we do it, it will be difficult to gain acceptance for alternate methods of program delivery, including distance education.

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Appendix A
Additional Comments
From DSS Directors

At the end of the survey, directors were invited to share additional comments regarding hiring of online-educated professional staff. Following are their unedited comments:

I fully support on-line learning and I believe at some point in the very near future as technology evolves, that it will fully catch up with classroom learning but at this point I do not believe it has reached that point yet. Some of the very best learning for me as I worked on my MSW was the role play sessions I participated in with my professors and fellow students. They were real time and highly interactive. This was very important to my learning. I am not aware of an online process which could be as real time interactive.

It appears education is becoming more accessible through advancements in technology. Most colleges today provide on-line degrees, hybrid degrees, as well as traditional. If the degree carries all appropriate accreditations, then they should not be seen as less rigorous or less of a degree.

Having observed others obtain an on-line degree, it is apparent that the on-line course tends to be strong in reading and writing with less time for discussion. However, as technology has evolved, the face to face interaction of on-line studies is improving. I do feel that some courses need to be in person. Field work and internships are for the experience and the university involvement is check-in and discussion. If there are means for video conferencing, this could be accomplished on-line. Interviewing/counseling is part talking part body language and that should remain in person.

On-line degrees might well for some professions and I have no objection to on-line courses as a part of the degree. But I would scrutinize the courses that were on-line, such as Social Work theory and practice classes, before I interviewed.

I do not believe we have any pure online SW degrees since I have been at ('X' County) (1 yr), not sure if had any applicants. Have several with online degrees in other areas. My general opinion is a mixture of online and classroom is best. The discussion can occur online, but I am still struggling to make the transition to pure online. I do not believe field placement can be online. The quality/rigor of the coursework can vary between institutions even with traditional schools and with the students themselves. I do believe there is a role and that it allows students options.

Distant Learning is a great opportunity for those individuals in rural communities that Desire a college education. Many of our local teachers utilize online classes to further their education.

I am obviously a strong advocate for on-campus and in class learning. Only a few courses at most should be on-line. There is simply no replacing the extra effort it takes to be in class, interact with others and more importantly "test" in class.

Online is not different from classroom setting. Same cost, same information, and to me more work with online is involved. You have to be engaged and participate fully with online.

I would not want to go to a Doctor, physical therapist, or even barber who did not have the benefit of an in-person learning experience. The context of social work education is a important as the content.

Much of social work relates to having the ability to communicate effectively, establishing positive/effective working relationships and developing an acceptance and understanding of who and where people are in their lives. I believe many skills are developed in our own personal interaction with others and those we learn with, and from, in the educational arena. While I do not at all discount online degrees, I strongly believe that interpersonal skills must be present no

matter how the degree is obtained. A more "formal" setting can possibly allow for more face-to-face exchange of thoughts, discussion and knowledge.

I have employees who have obtained on line degrees after coming to work for me. Most have not given good evaluations to their experience. In none of them have I seen a thirst for knowledge. for me there are two separate issues at stake: 1. How do we facilitate earning BSW/MSW for currently employed qualified SW staff in a manner that credits their work experience 2. what is the most effective hybrid model of online and on-campus to produce an adequate pool of qualified social workers

I realize that many traditional colleges offer quite a few classes on line and I don't think it makes a difference. I think Social Work especially needs interaction in the practice curriculum because of the nature of the work. I don't know how you would know if you can work with people, especially in Public Welfare, unless you have had that opportunity to get out in the field and interact.

I had difficulty answering some of the questions because I'm not very informed about online education. It is my understanding that online degrees are offered through for-profit entities and that sometimes accreditation is an issue. I know that many universities offer online options for students (in addition to classroom options). I wasn't sure if the questions were referring to both of these options or not?

I believe online education has its place but not sure it is a full substitute for the classroom and field placement that is needed within Social Work education. However, we must be willing to adapt to a changing environment regarding how education is delivered

Social Work is a dynamic profession and the hallmark is the "use of self" in building relationships. CSWE/accredited programs could offer some social work course work that would be appropriate for online completion but by and large the core curriculum of social work should be provided in-person and to be honest, an "apprentice" type educational program would even be best (not just an internship at the end of the educational process)

Appendix B The Questionnaire

What is your current job title at DSS?
How long have you had that job title? Years _____ Months _____
How long have you been working at DSS? Years _____ Months _____
Provide an estimate of your county's population. _____

Sex?
Race?
What is your age? ____
What is the highest level of education you have completed? Graduated from high school, Some college, Graduated from college, Some graduate school, Graduated with a Masters Degree, Graduated with a Ph.D. (or other doctorate degree), other
What is your educational experience? I have never completed an online course, I have completed an online course but my degree was not online, I have completed an online course and my entire degree was online, other
Online education is best suited for social work students at BSW level, MSW level, Neither at the BSW or the MSW level, Both the BSW and MSW level, other (please specify)
I believe that interview or counseling skills can be taught effectively in an online course. Likert
I believe that social work values and ethics can be taught effectively within an online course. Likert
I believe that field work or the social work internship can be accomplished effectively online. Likert
Online and traditional universities' degrees are equal rigor. Likert
In hiring decisions, I would consider a degree from online and traditional universities the same. Strongly Agree, Agree, Not Sure, Disagree, Strongly Disagree, Other (please specify)
If an applicant had no face-to-face classroom interaction, I would NOT hire someone with an online degree. Likert
Online and traditional courses offer the same flexibility in which quality of education is not jeopardized. Likert
Online and traditional courses offer the same course material. Likert Strongly Agree, Agree, Not Sure, Disagree, Strongly Disagree, Other (please specify)
Online and traditional courses offer the same learning experience for social work students. Likert Strongly Agree, Agree, Not Sure, Disagree, Strongly Disagree, Other (please specify)
Within my county, the type of college education (in class or online) the applicant obtained would be of no importance in hiring. Likert
In your perception which candidate would you PREFER to hire? On- campus, Online, Hybrid of both on- campus and online, Not sure, Hiring a job candidate is based on the job interview and accompanying documentation. Type of degree is not important, Other (please specify)
I have hired a social worker with an online degree. Yes, No, Not sure, Other (please specify)
Would you be willing to track the evaluations of employees who have online degrees to assess the long term performance differences between them and employees who had traditional college educations? If yes and you would like assistance setting this up, email smarson@nc.rr.com . Yes, No, Not sure, Other (please specify)
If you would like a copy of the final report, inset your email address here: _____
Do you have additional comments? _____