
The Pathway Program: A collaboration between 3 universities to deliver a social work distance education (DL) program to underserved areas of California

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Abstract

This paper describes the development of a partnership between three campuses to develop a (DL) education program-serving employees of county and tribal Health and Human Service Departments in remote rural areas of California. Specifically, the program supports the development of a career pathway for students living in isolated regions of Northern California and Inland Southern California. Surveys and focus groups carried out in 2008 and 2009 identified the need for such a program. Title IVE funding (federal funding for training and education of child welfare workers) was granted via the California Social Work Education Center based at the University of California, Berkeley, which also coordinates the program. Course development, outreach, advising, and student admissions began in Chico and Humboldt in the north and San Bernardino in the south. The first phase was considerable outreach to children's services county agencies whose employees needed to gain a B.A.S.W. and/or M.S.W. This included academic advising and study skills training. Progress on the implementation of each program along with considerable dialogue on the elements of successful collaboration are discussed.

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The usual image of California is one highly influenced by the Hollywood glitz of Los Angeles, the "left coast" liberalism of San Francisco, the wealthy conservatism of Orange County, the high tech billionaires of Silicone Valley, and, of course, endless golden beaches. However, a very different image emerges when we consider non-coastal, California. This is illustrated in The Five Californias (see Figure 1).

A Portrait of California – The Five Californias

These “Five Californias” represent the wildly divergent realities faced by California residents in terms of well-being.

Silicon Valley Shangri-La

1% of CA population
2 Neighborhood and County Groups
8.7% Latino



Extremely well-educated, high-tech high-flyers living in Silicon Valley—entrepreneurs and professionals fueling, and accruing the benefits of, innovation, especially in information technology. Highly developed capabilities give these Californians unmatched freedom to pursue the goals that matter to them.

Metro-Coastal Enclave California

18% of CA population
46 Neighborhood and County Groups
8.7% Latino



Affluent, credentialed, and resilient, the knowledge workers living in Metro-Coastal Enclave California enjoy comparative financial comfort and security in upscale urban and suburban neighborhoods. They have extremely high levels of well-being and access to opportunity.

Main Street California

38% of CA population
91 Neighborhood and County Groups
30.5% Latino



High levels of human development overall characterize this majority-minority group of Californians, who enjoy longer lives, higher levels of educational attainment, and higher earnings than the typical American. Yet these suburban and ex-urban Californians have an increasingly tenuous grip on middle-class life.

Struggling California

38% of CA population
83 Neighborhood and County Groups
49.8% Latino



Struggling California can be found across the state, from the suburbs, exurbs, and rural areas of the Central Valley to parts of major metro areas and the Inland Empire to swaths of Northern California. Struggling Californians work hard but find it nearly impossible to gain a foothold on security.

The Forsaken Five Percent

5% of CA population
11 Neighborhood and County Groups
68.9% Latino



Bypassed by the digital economy, left behind in impoverished LA neighborhoods as well as in rural and urban areas in the San Joaquin Valley, these Californians face an extremely constrained range of opportunities and choices.

Figure 1. The Five Californias created in 2011 by the California Human Development Report can be found at ” <http://www.measureofamerica.org/project/>

Figure 1 illustrates a substantial area of California in the Northern and Inland parts of the State, which is considered to be struggling economically and educationally and is the focus of the project described in this article. To serve students living in this area, three universities (Humboldt State University; California State University, Chico; and California State University, San Bernardino), came together to develop a DL program based on the concept of a “Ladder of Learning” that offers professional education linked to employment opportunities from High School to the Master’s in Social Work (M.S.W.) level and beyond (Morris, 2005). “Such a ladder begins at the High School level and suggests a progression to the AA degree, post AA Certificate, Bachelor’s in Social Work (B.S.W.), post B.S.W. Certificate, M.S.W., with various forms of Licensing, and/or Ph.D. The certificate concept introduces the idea that social workers can be on two rungs of the ladder at the same time and so are positioned to move up, when ready. Also the ladder suggests both an upward progression for the career path and at the same time a downward helping hand from those on higher rungs for those who need mentoring and/or supervisory support.” (p. 110). The DL program described here implemented three levels of this ladder: the A.A., B.S.W., and M.S.W. The AA level provided advising about prerequisites for the B.S.W. and assistance with completing these prerequisites at a local community college. The B.S.W. level and M.S.W. level provided accredited programs delivered at a distance by each of the partnering universities. The program was named the “Pathway” program.

The partnering universities in this project are members of a larger collaborative known as the California Social Work Education Center (CalSWEC) that has been in existence for over 25 years.

CalSWEC brings together all accredited social work programs in California, major social work employers, the State office of Human Services, and Foundations with a goal of promoting social work education, in general, and child welfare, mental health, and gerontological social work education in particular. This organizational foundation was the platform from which the “Pathway” DL program aimed at serving “struggling” California. It was natural that a discussion of access to education, rural and desert social work shortages, and building the social services workforce in the rural and desert areas should take place within CalSWEC. With this discussion, the three CSU universities began to co-create a pilot project designed to bring education to rural and desert areas with the motto of “grow your own” social workers. With this vision, the Pathway collaborative was created 10 years ago. The definition of collaboration in the Pathway Project appeared to be a natural and simple process, an extension of CalSWEC. In reality components of a framework were present, but grew and evolved over time. There was mutual trust and respect, clarity of roles and responsibilities, university autonomy, and a focused agenda. Once we began the project, our working group, structure for communication, decision-making, and appreciation for innovation and diversity formed.

The Pathway DL program originally offered federal funding for training and education for child welfare workers. This federal funding is referred to as Title IVE funding. Those students who were employees of County Child Welfare agencies and were candidates for social work education at the A.A., B.S.W. and M.S.W. levels are eligible for these funds. Generally they were employees who did not have the academic credentials to be promoted beyond their current positions and did not have access to a 4-year university either because of distance from such universities or personal life circumstances that made it impractical for them to attend a university campus. Outreach activities were developed and implemented and potential students were identified and encouraged to apply to the Pathway program. After two years, the State of California ruled that Title IVE funding could not be used for the AA level and so only the B.S.W. and M.S.W. stages of the Pathway were funded. We now have three “Pathways” up and running that have expanded beyond serving child welfare employees to serving as many underserved students as possible. A brief snapshot of progress on each campus is described below.

California State University (CSU), Chico.

CSU, Chico DL programs consist of a 3 or 2-year BSW program and a 3-year MSW program. An advanced standing, DL one-year MSW program was piloted last year with 6 students and is currently being evaluated for future consideration. There are currently 40 M.S.W DL students and 44 B.S.W. DL students.

With a generalist perspective for the BSW and MSW programs, CSU, Chico’s designed a hybrid program that consists of two campus face-to-face weekend classes per semester and the remaining in an online format. Both BSW and MSW programs offer 2-3 courses per semester. One-third of each course time (two weekends per semester) is face-to-face and two-third’s of each course is delivered through the campus online system (i.e. Blackboard Learn). Face-to-face sessions are 8-5pm on a Saturday and Sunday. This also includes periodic video conferencing in most of the classes throughout the semester. The B.S.W. DL program admits students each year and is a 2 or 3-year program. The 3-year M.S.W. DL program is a cohort model and admits students every three years with Field placements beginning second and third year.

California State University (CSU), Humboldt

Humboldt State University (HSU) B.S.W. DL program prepares students for beginning generalist social work practice. The M.S.W. DL program focuses on advance generalist practice in rural and Native American Communities. HSU is an online program where students are required to attend on-campus orientation sessions and mandatory annual intensives in January of each year. These all day intensive sessions are Thursday through Sundays 8-5pm. HSU offers admission every year for the 4-

year B.S.W. DL program, the 3.5-year M.S.W. DL program and the two-year advanced standing M.S.W. DL program.

California State University (CSU), San Bernardino

The program at CSU, San Bernardino, offers pre-requisite advising with a person who is the dedicated advisor for the Pathway program. In addition a hybrid B.S.W. is offered where courses in the major are all available at a distance, however, general education courses offered by other disciplines may or may not be available via distance learning. Thus the B.S.W. remains small with only 10 to 20 students opting for the Pathway option. The M.S.W. is now in its third year and is completely available at a distance. It is mostly asynchronous with some required synchronous seminars and a compulsory on-campus orientation every year. Currently 65 students are enrolled in the M.S.W. and the first cohort of 21 students graduated in June 2016.

Elements of a Successful Collaboration

There were several circumstances that made this collaboration between three campuses at a distance possible and successful. Thompson, et al (2009) when discussing their empirically tested theoretical model of collaboration, noted, five variables that help us identify this process of collaboration. These are governance, which is the joint development of structures and rules to collectively take action and solve problems; administration, which is “Establishing an effective operating system for collaboration that includes clarity of roles and responsibilities, communication channels that enhance coordination, and mechanisms to monitor each other’s activities in relation to roles and responsibilities...” (p. 26); organizational autonomy, which is being aware of and addressing the tension between achieving individual organizational missions and the commitment to the collective interest; mutuality, which is the identification of shared interests; and norms, which is the development of a commitment to reciprocity and trust.

Governance

(the joint development of structures and rules to collectively take action and solve problems)

CalSWEC has developed a set of bylaws, a governing board, an executive committee, and sub-committees of the board responsible for curriculum, research, and workforce development. The board consists of all social work program deans and directors of accredited programs in California, representatives of child welfare, mental health and aging services employers, representatives of the California Department of Social Services, Foundations and a specified number of non-profit agencies. The executive committee includes a representative from each of the entities comprising the Board. Members of the board, the executive committee, and the sub-committees are voted in by members of the board as specified in the bylaws. The membership and responsibilities of the Board, Executive committee, and sub-committees are also outlined in the bylaws. The CalSWEC board, executive committee and sub-committees meet quarterly. The irony is that CalSWEC is not a legal entity, it is a group of interested parties who have agreed to collaborate and have agreed to the bylaws and governing structures noted here. The decisions made by CalSWEC are not legally binding, they are simply commitments to collaborative agreements on statewide policies and procedures. The legal entity that is the contracting authority for CalSWEC is the campus that houses the project, which currently is the University of California, Berkeley.

CalSWEC has represented the largest coalition of social work programs in the nation for over 25 years. The collective body established the governance, rules, and relationships. This governance allows schools and county representatives to solve collective problems with shared responsibilities (Thompson, Perry, & Miller, 2009). Implementation of this type of governance allows CalSWEC to represent social work programs throughout the state. It was through conversations with each of our

county partners, employees, and universities that these pilot areas were chosen to establish a DL program that addressed the need for social workers in rural and desert areas. With this direction, the Pathway program was created and the governance remained consistent with CalSWEC governance. The decision making process was equally distributed and respected. Solving collective problems and differences was a respected negotiation. Three CSU campuses came together to form individualized programs that address alternative education in rural, desert and frontier areas of California. In addition, two of the three campuses, which both served the Northern California area partnered with the regional Mental Health coalition (called the Superior Region WET Partnership) and received additional funding for both campus's B.S.W. and M.S.W. DL programs. The governance within the Superior Region WET partnership aligned with the governing structure of the Pathway program and CalSWEC.

Administration

(Establishing an effective operating system for collaboration that includes clarity of roles and responsibilities, communication channels that enhance coordination, and mechanisms to monitor each other's activities in relation to roles and responsibilities)

Given that the CSU is the largest university system in the country, the three campuses in the Pathway partnership are part of a complex and sometimes cumbersome system wide bureaucracy. However, the CSU campuses are generally following the same policies and procedures. Within this university system, the Social Work programs are operated separately and autonomously and this commitment to autonomy has been mirrored in the Pathway program. For example, when the issue of accreditation was addressed, we quickly decided that we would only be creating extra headaches for ourselves if we applied for a new accreditation for the three-campus Pathway program. Our initial vision of creating one program to deliver the Pathway program through these 3 universities created accreditation and university bureaucratic nightmares. At this point, the vision shifted from one Pathway program to 3 individual programs that conform to their university bureaucracy and CSWE Accreditation standards. CSWE Accreditation was approved for each individual program.

The needs assessment from the service region of CSU, Chico and Humboldt State University indicated a need for student guidance from community college to B.S.W. and then MSW. This required a great deal of attention to general education and prerequisites in order for individuals to transfer into the 4-year degree institution. Although CSU, Chico and Humboldt did partner on prerequisite courses for potential B.S.W. students in the beginning of this process, each program currently operates independent of each other. On the other hand, CSU, San Bernardino's needs assessment revealed a strong need for the M.S.W. program and less interest in the B.S.W. program.

With established on-going communication, each campus benefitted from monthly conference calls where conversations took place about how we will develop a Professional Educational Pathway that will meet the vision of the group. These calls allowed each member to feel heard, valued, and respected. These calls were more than reviewing expectations and collecting updates from participants. The calls focused on innovation and creative ideas for technology and curriculum development and course delivery. Discussions of standardizing curriculum around issues related to child welfare and mental health have provided guidance to the development of each program. The overall tone of inclusion and creativity that occurred in these calls brought about a different level of contribution. Each university leveraged their strengths to develop a program that made most sense to their region and program vision.

Organizational Autonomy

(being aware of and addressing the tension between achieving individual organizational missions and the commitment to the collective interest)

As noted above, our campuses have gained from a long history of collaboration. The Title IV-E and Mental Health stipends do set restrictions on staffing and curriculum. However, because we are able to articulate accreditation and local campus requirements in our collaborative meetings, we are able to address any issues of academic freedom and resource allocation that might come up. For example the child welfare and mental health competencies were structured around the framework that CSWE requires for curriculum development. When building the curriculum for the Pathway program, each campus was able to maintain it's own campus mission while ensuring that each mission was also an important piece of the Pathway mission.

Working with different campuses, there is always a competing interest combined with this collective interest. Thompson, Perry, and Miller (2009) refer to this as the intrinsic tension. Although potential conflict or tension is a possibility with collaboration, all three programs were distinct and were designed for their regional need, which lead to different programs and delivery methods. The pathway program was co-designed yet kept each campus's academic autonomy to provide a curriculum that was equivalent to their on-campus programs. Within each campus, one of the most difficult and time-consuming tasks was the development of a faculty culture that supported online education. There were long discussions between faculty who did not (and still don't) believe in online education and those who believed that online/distributed/DL is not only possible but also a must for program survival in the 21st century. This tension within the faculty was addressed in the end by deciding that each side of the argument had valid points to make and that those faculty who want to teach in this online/ distributed/DL format would move forward with the program and those who prefer the campus face-to-face approach would continue in that mode. The tension did not go away but it was reduced by the development of a climate of acceptance for both approaches. Over the years, we have seen faculty's acceptance broadening with faculty feeling more comfortable teaching in the online/distributed/DL format.

Mutuality

(the identification of shared interests)

CalSWEC has clearly established itself as an entity that represents county partners and California accredited social work programs. There are shared goals with joint benefits and needs. CalSWEC brings interdependence and appreciation for issues that are beyond individual programs (Thompson, Perry, & Miller, 2009). This same interdependence was transferred to the Pathway programs. There was sharing of ideas, curriculum, technology, and dedication to the regional needs. For example, CSU, Chico and Humboldt State, both being in the northern most areas of California, worked together by partnering with joint funding proposals, recruitment, and mentoring program.

It was through shared interest, and similar goals that the critical factors of collaboration were created (Thompson, as cited in Thompson, Perry, & Miller, 2009). When we started the Pathway program we committed to needs assessments in our regions, which were completed in 2008 and 2009. We enrolled students in 2009 and have developed the admissions, curriculum, advising procedures, and administrative structures needed for each program. Since then, B.S.W. and M.S.W. students have graduated from the pathway program at all three campuses and are being employed in their respective region. We could not have done any of this without knowing that we would all follow through on our commitments and obligations.

Norms

(the development of a commitment to reciprocity and trust.)

Trust and reciprocity were foundational in our work on the Pathway programs (Thompson, Perry, & Miller, 2009). With the trust that has been built over 20 years through the CalSWEC collaboration, we have learned that we build more opportunities for our students by applauding each other's

achievements rather than competing with each other. These were skills we had built over the years and so, when the opportunity for a State Wide mental health stipend program came up, the fact that we could offer 1 entity (i.e. CaLSWEC) that would represent 17 universities (at that time) and had a track record of positive and productive collaboration made us a very attractive proposition for the State of California. Other Mental Health academic programs and professions took several more years to gain their Mental Health stipends. So with the Pathway program, we continued these habits. Regular conference calls, sharing ideas, all having an equal voice, respecting each other's unique situations regarding campus issues, community issues, and student need were central to our conversations.

Technology and Coaching

Although we did not include technology as a key element of our collaborative model in the beginning, we soon realized that technology played a big role in facilitating collaboration. All three pathways programs would not have been possible without leveraging technology. Each campus utilized their learning management system to deliver quality social work education.

Two out of the three campuses, utilized Sococo, a web-based application to deliver course content, advising students, working collaboratively on projects/assignments from a distance, and meeting with professional and academic coaches, etc. CSU, Chico and Humboldt State University co-created a space in Sococo called the Regional PAC (Professional and Academic Coaching) Center (See figure 2) that students from both campuses had access to.



Figure 2: Regional PAC Center for CSUC and HSU Students

This coaching center allowed graduates of both programs to serve professional and academic coaches to the current students. This shared Sococo space made working professionals in the field of social work accessible to current students. Students utilized these coaches to seek guidance on variety of issues, such as, writing in the profession, balancing personal and professional life, navigating higher education, self-care, exploring career opportunities in the field of health and human services, etc.

Conclusion

The description of the pathway program and the collaboration between three campuses to deliver it can be viewed as the "Russian Doll" effect. Russian Dolls are usually wooden dolls of increasing size where one doll can be nestled inside of another doll. In our situation, members of CalSWEC have an overall commitment to looking at social work education in a collaborative way but also assume that partner universities will develop their own unique programs within that shared understanding. The CalSWEC collaborative meets quarterly and this regular contact with each other reminds us of the collective commitments, which are our unifying force. Without the larger entity, we would not have considered collaborating with the Pathway program, in fact we would not have known each other well enough to share our ideas about distance education. We would not have so easily formed the 3-campus program and we certainly would not have had the support to implement the program. It is well worth the effort to build statewide collaborations in social work. This may seem like an impossible challenge in your part of the world, however, that is how we felt when we began. There were issues of size, numbers, and conflicting regional interests, not to mention that we were all too busy. We persevered and the infrastructure we have built has been the launching pad for many initiatives including the Pathway DL program described here. Our commitment to governance, administration, organizational autonomy, mutuality and norms has allowed us to build an understanding of how to collaborate and how to develop new initiatives together.

We propose adding technology as one of the key element of successful collaboration in distance education. This is in congruence with the technological frame of reference (TFR) model that recognizes that the collective knowledge and use of technology is crucial. This TFR construct not only focuses on technology but shared assumptions, and expectations of organizational members around technology (Orlikowski & Gash, 1994). Similarly, the DL pathways model leveraged technology to reduce member incongruity by allowing faculty at each campus more time to understand the technical strategy and technology in use in this pathways program. In sum, this led to faculty slowly embracing and teaching in DL pathways model. Thus, increasing overall impact of the DL pathways model at all three campuses.

More importantly, this collaborative DL pathways model achieved what it was set for. We are able to create a program that is accessible, affordable and achievable to residents of Rural Northern and Inland Southern California who otherwise would not have the opportunity of earning a college degree. It is because of this program that Rural Northern and Inland Southern California counties have been able to "grow their own" professional social workers and are meeting the diverse health and social needs of our clients.

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