



September 1981

## Assessing Part-Time Education in an M.S.W. Program

Ursula C. Gerhart  
*Rutgers University*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw>

 Part of the [Social Work Commons](#)

### Recommended Citation

Gerhart, Ursula C. (1981) "Assessing Part-Time Education in an M.S.W. Program," *The Journal of Sociology & Social Welfare*: Vol. 8 : Iss. 3, Article 10.

Available at: <https://scholarworks.wmich.edu/jssw/vol8/iss3/10>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Social Work at ScholarWorks at WMU. For more information, please contact [maira.bundza@wmich.edu](mailto:maira.bundza@wmich.edu).



ASSESSING PART-TIME EDUCATION IN  
AN M.S.W. PROGRAM

Ursula C. Gerhart - Professor  
School of Social Work  
Rutgers University

ABSTRACT

Because of the dearth of debates on the merits of full-time vs. part-time M.S.W. education, some findings on law-school part-time education are reported, together with the results of an empirical study which compared the achievement of part-time and full-time social work students. Given the same opportunities, part-time students do as well as full-timers.

In spite of a continuing demand for part-time programs from individuals and groups interested in pursuing graduate studies in social work, and in spite of the proliferation of part-time MSW programs in various schools of social work, there has been a virtual absence of debate on the merits of such a program in the social work literature. A careful search of several social work journals published during the past 15 years fails to reveal any discussion of the issue.<sup>1</sup>

The failure to discuss such a vital issue related to professional social work education may rest on the long-established but seldom articulate assumption that part-time studies are somehow inferior to full-time. This assumption in turn seems to rest on the notion that while knowledge from the behavioral sciences could be acquired by students through independent reading, extension courses and part-time programs, the one crucial ingredient that cannot effectively be imparted in part-time education is the "Socialization to the profession (which) requires an in-depth encounter with social work practice over a period of time."<sup>2</sup> Up until the middle of the 1980's this "in depth encounter" had been interpreted by the Council on Social Work Education to include at least one year of full-time residence for all MSW students.<sup>3</sup>

Recently the Council issued proposed revisions of procedures and standards for accreditation of baccalaureate MSW programs.<sup>4</sup> The proposed revisions no longer make the year's full-time residence an absolute requirement for accreditation and concomitantly for MSW studies. If accepted, the new CSWE standards effectively allow for the inclusion of part-time programs in curricular options.<sup>5</sup> This will be a most welcome new factor in the accreditation standards since it will allow many wage-earning heads of households and others who cannot afford full-time attendance to matriculate in MSW curriculae.

In spite of contemplated changes the proposition that full-time social work education is, for any reason, better than part-time has gone unexamined for many years. One does not find any clear cut statement of a rationale for preferring one type of program to the other. In fact, there have been no social work studies supporting the proposition that full-time education produces better professionals than would part-time programs.

Since the social work literature has not addressed itself to the issue of part-time studies, it is worthwhile to examine part-time programs offered by the legal profession. Legal studies were chosen for a comparison since they most closely approximate MSW studies of various practice based, professional curriculae. Law schools require three years of full-time study and include (but do not require) practicums in their curriculum.

For many years American law schools have maintained part-time legal education programs which are mostly offered during evening hours. Indeed, in recent years, part-time law training programs have proliferated. For example, several years ago the New Jersey legislature mandated part-time programs in the two State law schools. More recently, the Wisconsin legislature has required the State University Law School there to undertake a part-time program. These actions have in part reflected a desire to accommodate the great demand for legal education by expanding the use of facilities and by opening educational opportunities to meritorious candidates who are already working, supporting families, or otherwise unable to undertake full-time studies.

The development of part-time legal education has been accompanied by great controversy.<sup>6</sup> "Night" law schools have always been held in low regard, and the prestige of full-time law schools with part-time programs tends to diminish. The great private university law schools such as Harvard, Yale and Columbia to name a few, have shunned part-time education for a variety of reasons.

The history of legal education represents a development from clerkship in a lawyer's office to part-time studies, culminating in the full-time university law school with a full-time faculty. It is understandable that part-time education has represented a retrogression from hard-won university-oriented gains. Indeed, at one time the prestigious Association of American Law Schools threatened to exclude part-time law schools from membership.<sup>7</sup> It was also suggested that part-time students be limited to specialized programs so that they could not compete with the graduates of full-time programs.<sup>8</sup> But these approaches were eventually resisted and defeated as anti-democratic.

In contrast to the social work experience, the merits of part-time vis-a-vis full-time legal education programs have been extensively debated and studied. The results of a recent study commissioned by the American Association of Law Schools are revealing and of significance to social workers. This study, known as the "Kelso Report",<sup>9</sup> examined part-time legal education in 179 American law schools. A major finding was that, for the most part, part-time programs do not command the resources of the full-time programs, especially in respect to faculty, research

resources and counseling availability. The attrition rate of part-time law students is nine times that of full-time students.

The most important finding, however, came as a surprise to many legal educators. This was that where part-time students had available to them an equivalence of teaching, research and other resources, they performed as well as, and sometimes better, than full-time students. Performance in law schools was measured by rank in class and withdrawal from school because of academic deficiencies. Additionally, impressionistic performance data was obtained through interviews with deans and faculty. The factors which account for the better performance of the part-time students include their greater maturity, experience and activation.

The Kelso study also found that career patterns (as measured by income, and type of employment reported by alumni) and the rate of successful performance of part-time students were more closely related to rank in class and to the level of educational resources available rather than to whether students attended a full-time or part-time program.

Because of the increasing demand for part-time social work education the time has arrived for a closer exploration of unexamined and untested assumptions about the merits of part-time education. Is full-time social work education in fact superior to part-time study or is this proposition an artifact of snobbism tied to the higher socio-economic status of those who can afford to go full-time? This study reports the results of an empirical examination of this question.

### Background

In 1974 the Rutgers University School of Social Work established an experimental part-time program (PTP)<sup>10</sup> which did not necessitate the year's full-time residency, in response to recommendations and requests from within and without the University. Recommendations came, for instance, from the Carnegie Commission on Higher Education<sup>11</sup> and the University Committee to Study Post-Baccalureate Education. Requests came from alumni groups and from numerous individuals who could not afford to enroll on a full-time basis. These requests and recommendations reflected shrinking scholarship and student stipend funds, a burgeoning inflation, and the increasing desire of many women to enter the professional labor force.

It was stipulated that members of the PTP either be women with family responsibilities or others, especially minority group members, who were heads of household and who needed to continue earning salaries. An admission ratio was established to the effect that only one PTP student to every 7 FTP students be admitted on an annual basis. PTP students were required to complete all class and field requirements in a period of four years. Special field placement arrangements such as block placements and evening and weekend placements were made available to the PTP students. For the most part the PTP students were integrated into classes already attended by full-time program (FTP) students. In most instances faculty could not distinguish between FTP and PTP students.

In its fourth year of operation, at a time when the PTP had graduated a total

of 38 students, this study was undertaken, comparing FTP (Full-Time Program) and PTP graduates, in order to examine the effectiveness of the experimental program. A decision was made to survey alumni, rather than current students. Alumni can report only retrospectively on their curricular experiences, but are in a position to evaluate how well their programs prepared them for professional practice.

Method

The study sample consisted of all 38 PTP graduates who had graduated by December, 1977, and a randomly selected group of 43 FTP graduates, matched only by year of graduation. Data for the study were collected from available student records and from questionnaires.

Student records yielded demographic data, grade point averages, admission ratings, number of courses taken each term and information pertaining to employment and volunteer work prior to matriculation. The questionnaires requested data pertaining to current employment, earnings, and asked for retrospective information regarding number of dependents during MSW studies, satisfaction with class, field, advising and other components of their MSW programs. The follow-up mailings were sent to all alumni in the sample.

Findings

Sixty alumni returned completed and usable questionnaires, a return rate of 75 per cent. In order to determine whether there were substantial differences between those who replied to the questionnaire and those who did not, data from available student records were compared for these two groups. There were no significant differences between the repliers and the non-repliers except for the fact that the repliers were older (Table 1).

---

TABLE 1  
DIFFERENCES BETWEEN REPLIERS AND NON-REPLIERS  
(N=81)

Repliers vs. Non-Repliers	Chi Square	d.f.
FTP vs. PTP	.03	1
Method Major (casework, groupwork, c.o., administration)	2.50	3
Age	12.30	3*
Gender	.03	1
Ethnicity	2.22	3
Admission rating score	2.77	3
Undergraduate grade point average	6.54	2
MSW grade point average	4.99	2

\*Significant at  $p < .006$

There were few differences between the FTP and PTP alumni. The differences that emerged were expectable, a function of the built-in admission requirements (Table 2).

There were, of course, significant age differences. The PTP alumni were older ( $p < .0001$ ), a finding consistent with the findings of recent nation-wide surveys of part-time programs in social work, in law, and in higher education. PTP alumni were more likely to be women ( $p < .01$ ) who had heavier family responsibilities while they were students than was the case with FTP students. PTP students had more dependents ( $p < .0002$ ), most of whom were school and pre-school children living at home. Twenty-five percent of PTP students as compared to 9% of FTP students had children under six years of age. Forty-five percent of PTP students, as compared to only 9% of FTP students, had children whose ages ranged from seven to fifteen years.

Differences between the two groups were also evident in their marital status ( $p < .006$ ). Thirty-five percent of FTP alumni were "never married" at the time they were students, but only 3% of the PTP graduates were never married. Of the PTP group, 21% were either separated or divorced as compared to 3% of the FTP students.

TABLE 2

COMPARISON OF PTP AND FTP ALUMNI  
(N=81)

Comparison Areas	Chi Square	d.f.	
Age	20.9	3	XX
Ethnicity	2.47	3	
Method Major	2.17	3	
Gender	6.35	1	
Marital Status While Student	12.16	3	X
Number of Dependents While Student	23.8	5	XX
Age of Youngest Child While Student	16.6	3	XX
Age of Oldest Child While Student	22.6	3	XX
Current Income	2.43	5	
# of Transfer Credits	5.74	3	
Undergraduate Grade Point Average	0.377	2	
Admission Ratings	3.02	3	
MSW Grade Point Average	0.28	2	
# of Years Employed Prior to Matriculation	1.05	3	
# of Years in Volunteer Work Prior to Matriculation	3.27	3	

X Significant at or above  $p < .01$  level

XX Significant at or above  $p < .001$  level

The two groups did not differ significantly along the following dimensions: residence; ethnicity<sup>13</sup> method major; undergraduate grade point averages; admission ratings; and credits at the graduate level and from BSW studies which were transferable toward their MSW degree.

No significant differences between the two groups existed in respect to work and volunteer experiences prior to matriculation. The modal group in each program had no prior social work employment (35% of the FTP and 45% of the PTP students). Most entering students had had experience in volunteer work (77% of PTP and 87% of the FTP group).

Members of both groups performed equally well during their MSW studies, receiving the same grade point averages at time of graduation.

How satisfied were alumni with various aspects of their educational experience? It had been postulated that the PTP group would be somewhat less satisfied since they had to fit work and family responsibilities into time devoted to their studies and had less time to interact with fellow students and faculty than their FTP counterparts did. Nonetheless, the PTP alumni did not differ significantly from the FTP alumni on any of the eleven satisfaction dimensions which were examined. These included satisfaction with learning opportunities in class and in field, advising, opportunities to interact with students and with faculty, participation in committee work, course selection, field options and school related but non-academic activities (Table 3).

TABLE 3  
CURRICULUM SATISFACTION DIFFERENCES BETWEEN FTP AND PTP ALUMNI  
(N=59)

Satisfaction Areas	Percent Satisfied	
	Full Time	Part Time
Learning opportunities in field agency	87.1	93.1*
Field instructor as teacher	83.9	92.9*
Patterns of classroom scheduling	87.1	68.9*
School based advising	74.2	65.6*
Opportunities to interact with faculty	87.1	65.5*
Opportunities to interact with other students	90.3	79.2*
Opportunities to participate in committee work	83.9	70.4*
Opportunities to participate in non-academic activities	80.7	70.4*
Opportunities to take independent study courses	76.6	77.8*
Field options	77.4	79.3**
Preparation for current job	86.7	81.44**
<u>Taking own program all over again given the chance</u>	77.4	53.6*

$\chi^2 = N.S., 3 \text{ d.f.}, \chi^2 = N.S., 6 \text{ d.f.}$

Both groups agreed in their ratings on how well their program had prepared them for their current jobs (Table 3). Alumni from both programs obtained employment quite readily after graduation: 88% of the FTP and 84% of the PTP alumni found jobs within one month after graduation and almost all obtained employment in social work.

There were no significant differences between the groups as far as their employment auspices were concerned. Of the alumni who reported employment in social work, 52% worked for State and Local governments, 34% for voluntary, non-sectarian agencies, 9.5% for voluntary sectarian agencies and 4.5% were in private practice.

There were no significant differences in respect to job functions of alumni. Of the PTP alumni who were employed in social work, 48% reported that casework was their most important function, 22% reported group work, 4% community organization, 9% supervision, 13% general administration and 4% reported it as research.

In line with a previous study conducted at the Rutgers Graduate School of Social Work<sup>14</sup> we observed that shortly after graduation many alumni switch practice methods. In other words, alumni begin to practice in methods other than those for which their graduate studies had prepared them. Here too no significant differences were observed between the groups. Of all alumni surveyed 100% of the administration majors described their primary function as administration; 64% of the caseworkers described it as casework, 33% of the group workers continued to practice primarily as such while only 10% of the community organization majors were practicing in their field.

The modal earnings (also the median income) of both groups are also similar: 37% of FTP and 37% of the PTP alumni report income in the \$11,000 - \$13,999 range. Twenty-three percent of the FTP and 26% of the PTP alumni earn in the \$14,000-\$16,999 range, while 27% of the FTP graduates as compared to 15% of the PTP group earned \$17,000/year or more.

No differences in attrition rates have been observed between the two groups. Attrition rates (which include data for students who registered but never showed up for classes, and students who left school for academic or personal reasons) amount to 10% each year for PTP and FTP students. This is in sharp variance to the high "night school" attrition rates reported by the law schools.

### Conclusion

The findings of this study suggest that, given the same opportunities the performance of social workers trained in part-time programs is comparable to that of graduates of full-time programs. These opportunities should include the integration of part-time students into full-time program classes and the provision of comparable advising and research programs. Our data indicate that the long-standing, implicit resistance to part-time social work education may not be based on the merits of the graduates' performance but may be linked to other considerations. These may include the slightly higher costs inherent in PTP programs; for example, more advising, the scheduling of courses outside of the usual weekday and day-time



hours and new patterns for scheduling field experiences. However, in balance the benefits accruing from the inclusion of part-time students in the MSW curriculum seem to outweigh its costs.

Notes and References

1. Journals which were reviewed include: Social Work, Journal of Education for Social Work, Social Casework, and Social Work Research and Abstracts.
2. Frank M. Lowenberg, Time and Quality in Graduate Social Work Education: Report of the Special Committee to Study the Length of Graduate Social Work Education. (New York: Council on Social Work Education, 1972), p. 12.
3. Ibid., Recommendation #1.
4. "Proposed Revisions of Standards, Statuses and Procedures" CSWE Memorandum dated 6-16-80.
5. Ibid., p. 9, paragraph 5:  

The graduate program shall offer as one among any program designs, a program design of two full-time academic years of professional education, including a practicum, leading to the master's degree.
6. For example, John C. Archer "Is there a Difference Between Night and Day?", Student Law Journal, Vol. 13 (1968), pp. 16-25; Lester Brickman "Is Law School a Full-Time Enterprise?: Part Time Students and Part Time Teachers", Council on Legal Education for Professional Responsibilities, Vol. 10 (May, 1978), pp. 1-8; Alfred Z. Reed, "Social Desirability of Evening or Part-Time Law School", American Law School Review, Vol. 7 (1931), pp. 198-235; Joseph T. Tinelly, Part-Time Legal Education: A Study of the Problems of the Evening Law Schools (New York: Foundation Press), 1958.
7. As cited in Charles D. Kelso, The ALLS Study of Part-Time Legal Education: Final Report (Washington, D.C.: Association of American Law Schools), 1972, p. 14.
8. Ibid., pp. 10-11.
9. Kelso, op. cit.
10. Since the CSWE stipulates in its Manual of Accrediting Standards for Graduate Professional Schools of Social Work, (New York: CSWE), 1971, that "At least one of the two years required (for the completion of the MSW) shall be taken in full-time residence," p. 18, the Rutgers Graduate School of Social Work requested a waiver of the year's residence.
11. Carnegie Commission on Higher Education, Less Time, More Options (Hightstown, N.J.: McGraw Hill), 1971.

12. Sherman Barr. Address presented at Conference of Social Work Deans, Washington, D.C., November 17, 1978: Kelso, op. cit.; Bhatnagar, Joti, Educational Experiences of Part-Time University Students (Montreal: Concordia University), June 1975, Eric #ED 111 276.
13. Although the differences are not statistically significant, the FTP had attracted more Black students (23%) than the PTP (11%). This is because there are more scholarship resources available to minority group members in full-time programs than in part-time programs.
14. Ursula Gerhart and Miriam Dinerman "Preliminary Report on Alumni-Curriculum Survey," October, 1974, mimeographed report. See also by the same authors "Professionals or Technicians? Interface of Alumni Careers and Curriculum," mimeographed, 1975.