

# What motivates non-traditional students to choose social work as a major/profession?

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## ABSTRACT

*Non-traditional students are a growing population in higher education, yet our appreciation of the unique factors that prompt them to choose Social Work as a major have not increased. In this qualitative study, 26 non-traditional students attending a small public university were interviewed about their decision to choose social work as a major and as a profession after graduation. Results indicate experiences varied among the participants. Non-traditional students experienced differing levels of motivation, campus involvement, and participation in social activities from their traditional counterparts. They generally declared that they came to social work to serve the disenfranchised and they also reported a social support network consisting of family, peer, and institutional support that increased their successful completion of degree requirements, even though these networks were not readily available to most non-traditional students interviewed in this report. The classroom offered a ray of hope for the engagement of non-traditional students, an opportunity to strengthen student identity and draw connections across the multiple worlds where these students reside. The implications of this study show the importance of recognizing the needs of non-traditional students, as well as giving them a support system to allow a more enjoyable college experience.*

*Key words: Non-traditional students, Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCU), social work majors, social work profession, socioeconomic status, Code of Ethics.*

## ¿Qué motiva a los estudiantes mayores a seleccionar el trabajo social como Carrera universitaria/profesión?

### RESUMEN

*Los estudiantes mayores [llamados no tradicionales en los Estados Unidos] forman parte de una población estudiantil universitaria en crecimiento, sin embargo, nuestra apreciación de los factores singulares que los motivan a escoger el trabajo social como carrera no ha aumentado. En este estudio cualitativo, se entrevistó a 26 estudiantes mayores –los cuales asistían a una universidad estatal pequeña— sobre su decisión de escoger el trabajo social como carrera y profesión después de graduarse. Los resultados indican que las experiencias varían entre los participantes. Los estudiantes mayores experimentaron distintos niveles de motivación, integración a la vida de la ciudadela universitaria y participación en actividades sociales cuando se los comparó con los estudiantes jóvenes típicos. En general los estudiantes declararon que ingresaban a trabajo social para servir a los marginados, y también se refirieron a una red de apoyo social que constaba de la familia, compañeros y apoyo institucional, lo cual incrementó las posibilidades al éxito de completar los requisitos de graduación, aunque estas redes no siempre estaban disponibles a la mayoría de los estudiantes mayores que fueron entrevistados en este informe. El aula ofreció una luz de esperanza para la participación de los estudiantes mayores, una oportunidad para fortalecer su identidad y para establecer conexiones entre los múltiples mundos donde residen dichos estudiantes. Las implicaciones de este estudio muestran la importancia de reconocer las necesidades de los estudiantes mayores, así como también de dotarlos de un sistema de apoyo que les permita una experiencia universitaria más placentera.*

**Palabras clave:** Estudiantes mayores; Universidades y Centros de educación superior Históricamente negros (HBCU por sus siglas en inglés); carrera en trabajo social, profesión de trabajo social; estatus socio-económico; Código ético.

## Introduction

Choosing a college major is one of the most important steps in a student's academic life. A major not only establishes the sequencing of courses a student takes in the process of academic training, but also influences the choice of careers one is likely to engage in later in life. Available literature (Berger, 1988; Rask & Bailey, 2002; Song & Glick, 2004; Turner & Bowen, 1999) verifies that the choice of an academic major is one of the most significant steps that affects an individual's labor market outcome, beginning with early schooling and continuing through initial career openings. With respect to status attainment, an academic major is one of the vital determinants of career aspirations, and occupational opportunities and rewards (Pascarella & Terenzini, 1991).

The process of choosing a major usually starts by the end of high school, when potential high school graduates start selecting colleges and universities, and continues up to the time when university sophomore students are officially required to narrow their academic aspirations to specific areas of training (Rask & Bailey, 2002). Informed or ill-informed, students engage in this activity with a lot of enthusiasm and competition among themselves. For some students, the choice is swift and definitive, whereas, for some others, the choice remains tentative for some time. By not choosing a major promptly, the undeclared student exposes himself to a wide variety of areas

of study from which he may eventually emerge more informed and ready to select a major, or the student may be wasting money and time by enrolling in and completing courses which may not apply to the area of study selected at a later date (Aslanian, 2001; Choy, 2002; Cook & King, 2004). Some other students still choose their majors quite early, but keep changing them repeatedly until they settle on a given one either out of frustration or conviction that it is the right major. Apart from the waste of money and time, changing a major is an ordinary occurrence in academic life for both traditional and non-traditional students (Hagedorn, Cypers, Moon, Maxwell, & Lester, 2006; Hagedorn, Maxwell, Cypers, Moon, & Lester, 2007). Institutions of higher education are now enrolling more and more students who are coming back to school for the first or second time because they need to start or change careers. The proportion of adults 25 years or older who are undergraduate students continues to increase (Bauman, Wang, DeLeon, Kafentzis, Zavala-Lopez, & Lindsey, 2004; Hamil-Luker & Uhlenberg, 2002; Rowan-Kenyon, 2007). This group of students is described as non-traditional students. The definition of 'nontraditional student' varies from context to context. Available literature (Levine & Nidiffer, 1996; London, 1992; Pascarella & Terenzini, 1998; Westbrook & Sedlacek, 1991) use the term "non-traditional" to describe students who are older than typical college students, work because of financial

necessity, belong to the first generation in their family to attend college, do not live on campus, attend classes part-time, and/or are members of minority racial groups. Elsewhere, non-traditional students, also known as mature students (Tabatabaei, Schrottner, & Reichgelt, 2006) or as re-entry students (Carney-Crompton & Tan, 2002), are defined as students who, for one reason or another, could not attend college following their high school graduation, and who, now in their maturity, decide to return to college. Non-traditional students are also defined as students over 25 years old, married or single, or at times with children (Rosenthal, Folse, Alleman, Boudreaux, Soper & Von Bergen, 2000). They generally hold a General Education Diploma (GED<sup>®</sup>) and are usually among the first in their families to attend college or university. They tend to be married and have children. It is also common to find some who are separated, divorced, or widowed.

Non-traditional and traditional students face the same university issues, even though they may behave differently from one group to another. The literature is replete with studies addressing issues of traditional students, but scant about issues non-traditional students face when they rejoin the educational system. The choice of majors by non-traditional students is one of the issues addressed superficially in the literature. The findings of this study will increase faculty's knowledge of their students,

help faculty tailor their teaching to the needs of their audience, and ease the process of differentiation at the end of the day.

## Methods

After clearance from the Social Work Department and the University's Institutional Review Board (IRB), the researcher enlisted the collaboration of his two colleagues in the Department as gatekeepers for the student population. Besides brochures sent to each student in the Department, the gatekeepers made announcements of the study in their different classes and through brochures posted in key locations all over campus. They discussed the study's potential benefits to the Department, and invited students to enroll in it as participants. The recruitment criteria were to be a "non-traditional social work major" and to volunteer to participate in the study. Of the students who responded to the brochures and advertisement in class, the researcher recruited students on a "first come, first served" basis. Participants were paid \$10 as compensation for their time and/or their transportation to and from the University. The fact that the researcher was at the same time a member of the faculty in the Department led into issues of dual relationship where the participants were both students and participants simultaneously. These issues were clearly addressed by the gatekeepers at the onset of the study, and later in the informed consent form signed at the beginning of each interview.

Using a purposive sampling method, the researcher enrolled 26 non-traditional students out of the 110 students majoring in social work. As soon as students enlisted in the study, informed consent forms were obtained and arrangements were made for a mutually convenient time and place for the interview. Conveniently, all interviews took place in the researcher's office. The interview was semi-structured and consisted of both closed and open-ended questions about the process of choosing an academic major. Besides the written schedule of questions, some probes were used here and there to solicit more information and/or for clarification of new ideas. The interviews lasted up to 60 minutes. The number of participants was arrived at as soon as the researcher reached redundancy during the interviews and guaranteed maximum variation in the

recruitment and reaction to the main topic (Patton, 2002). The sample consisted of 26 participants and the Table below presents its description.

To protect the confidentiality and privacy of the participants, pseudonyms were used to refer to the research setting and participants. Using qualitative methods of research, namely semi-structured interviews and observation, this research endeavored to uncover, describe, and understand the reasons that prompt non-traditional students to choose Social Work as their major at the Jane Addams University (JAU), a member of the historically black colleges and universities (HBCU) in the Midwestern United States. To preserve the integrity of each interview, permission was obtained to audiotape and transcribe all interviews. None of the participants rejected the idea of being tape-recorded.

**Table 1.** Sample Description

	African American	Caucasian	Total
Male	1	1	<b>2</b>
Female	6	18	<b>24</b>
Total	7	19	<b>26</b>
Single	5	9	<b>14</b>
Married	2	10	<b>12</b>
Total	7	19	<b>26</b>
Unemployed	3	7	<b>10</b>
Employed	4	12	<b>16</b>
Full Time Employed	2	8	<b>10</b>
Part Time Employed	2	4	<b>6</b>
Total	7	19	<b>26</b>

Data analysis began at the end of the first interview and continued beyond the interviews of all the participants. The transcription of the interviews was carried out concurrently with data collection. Since the researcher was both the interviewer and the transcriber, the process of transcription aided with the unitization of interviews and the categorization of the units. Units are a single word, phrase, sentence or a paragraph expressing a single idea different from other ideas. The units were transcribed on index cards with specific information linking them to the specific interviews from which they were derived. Units were finally assembled into categories. Most categories were derived from the interview schedule, some from the literature review and the rest from the interviews. Finally, units in the categories were used to construct the case study that constitutes the findings of this inquiry. The case study is fully anchored in the interviews from which units and categories were derived (Patton, 2002; Rodwell, 1998).

## Results

JAU is a comprehensive four-year, public, land-grant university, established under the Second Morrill Act of August 30, 1890. The University was founded in 1891 and its department of social work accredited for the first time in 1974. In addition to its own other specific characteristics, JAU prides itself as “a living laboratory of human relations” where students, staff, and faculty are committed to academic

growth, service, and preservation of the racial and cultural diversity of the institution. In 2005, JAU enrolled 58.5% female and 41.5% male students. From a typical black land-grant university, JAU averages now about 80% white students, 15% African American students, and 5% other minorities. The average student in the department of social work at JAU is a white female aged between 20 and 30 years with 1 or 2 children. This student in the department of social work is a perfect reflection of the general population at JAU. According to JAU annual Exit and Employment Surveys, most social work graduates are employed by the Department of Health and Human Resources (DHHR) within or outside the state, and private and sectarian social work agencies within or outside the state. Title IV-E, a DHHR grant which pays tuition and stipend to qualified students and then binds them for the amount of time they received the support, has been and still is instrumental in some social work graduates’ immediate employment after graduation.

Some students at JAU first enrolled in the associated community college and then matriculated to the university. Locally, the transfer from the two-year college to the four-year college is encouraged by the proximity of the two institutions and other administrative agreements. For instance, Latoya, who realized her vocation to social work quite late, had to move from the nursing department from the two-year college to the social

work department in the four-year college. It is also anecdotally believed that successful two-year college graduates whose self-esteem improved greatly during their two-year college training enroll in four-year colleges.

This researcher has always been interested in uncovering and understanding the motivation of JAU students to select social work as their major in college and potential future career. From routine interviews with students taking Introduction to Social work at the beginning of every semester in the last ten years, the researcher has established that new enrollees come to social work driven by a variety of reasons, including the need to return the favor they received from social workers in their lives, and the determination to answer their calling to serve the needy in the community as social workers. Some students choose social work as their major because they think that social work is the easiest major on campus, and that all social work alumni are employed after graduation (R. Mutepa, Personal Communication, January 15, 2012). In addition to these and to JAU students’ reasons, the current literature also reports that the family, the socioeconomic status of the family of origin and the family of choice, faculty as role models, and the student’s race and gender, are among the salient and current reasons.

The 26 students enrolled in the study came from a variety of families; some

from families where parents, now in their old age, are still married today; some from families that were widowed; and some still from families where parents went through an amicable or contentious divorce. Some students came from large families whereas some others were from families where they were the only child. Generally, these participants came from all types of families and had encountered every type of familial issue that one can imagine. Eva recounted how she was excluded from her step-family on the day her dad and stepmother came back from their honeymoon. In plain words and in her father's presence, her stepmother asked her to take whatever was hers and leave the household the following morning, saying that she was no longer part of that family. Leah, whose mother was 14 when she was born, still remembered that her mother and she were raised together as sisters and not as mother and child. A sizable number of participants were raised by their grandparents, aunts, or other relatives, because they were conceived out of wedlock or were conveniently abandoned to their grandparents because their parents or at times their fathers or mothers individually, had to relocate and work in another town. These were the family issues that stopped some from completing high school and/or enrolling in college immediately after graduation from high school.

In so far as education is concerned, these participants came from families where

parents were illiterate or from families where parents were either high school or college dropouts or graduates. The majority of the parents attended high school but not college, for one reason or another. Maureen's father was the only physician in town and Maureen still remembers how cherished and loved she was because of her dad's position in their little community. Latoya's father was an electrical engineer and her mother a registered nurse. In most cases, however, because of their limited education level, the participants' parents were more likely to work in coal mines than any other trade: some worked in local government agencies. Some were teachers, others were in the military; some others were farmers, ranchers, and fruit growers or worked in some local small businesses. Anitalife's grandmother, who raised her, was the cemetery superintendent, whereas Mwansa's father, a barber by profession, ran his little company of about ten barbers who faithfully and diligently serviced their small community. Adam, the only male Caucasian in the study, reported that his father never worked all his life. Initially, he was an alcoholic for many years, and then had a massive coronary and finally he was on medication and "everything got worse," Adam solemnly testified.

In short, regardless of their race or gender, most non-traditional students generally shared a rather low socioeconomic status; they were, for the most part, daughters and sons of working people,

many of whom were struggling financially. Most participants with the exception of Mwansa, Latoya and Maureen acknowledged that they came from lower or middle classes. Adam sadly described himself as coming from a poor, poor class. Considering her father's position, Maureen definitely came from a well-to-do family. Maureen, whose father was a physician, still recalled that her father's income was over \$100,000.00 a year and that she always checked the highest income on forms whenever she had to complete them for school and other activities. Mwansa did not define herself as coming from a poor or a rich family despite the fact that her father owned a small business and a small plane. She preferred using the term 'working class,' meaning the people who could make considerable money, but had no formal training. These were the jobs that the participants' parents worked on to feed their households and support their children in any endeavor.

Now that the participants are all grown up and working to support themselves and their families, their socioeconomic status has not changed much. Maureen, who grew up in the richest family in the township, reported that she is now just comfortable; she cannot make the same amount of money that her father once made as a physician. Most participants are working in menial jobs where they are paid slightly more than the minimum wage and are heavily dependent on the welfare system. A sizable number

of participants were shop attendants, certified nursing assistants, or aides of some sort in hospitals, nursing homes, and schools. A limited number of students were employed in social agencies.

In contrast, to the question to of how they were financing their studies at JAU, most participants acknowledged that they were receiving financial assistance, had assumed student loans, and were still searching for scholarships and/or fellowships within the educational system. Because of the financial crisis that the country is going through currently, more and more students now leave school for one or two semesters to raise money for their families and/or for tuition in the coming semesters. Some are quitting school altogether or staying longer in school. The growing number of applications for the Title IV-E grant attests to it.

Just like their parents before them, most participants are of low socioeconomic status. The socioeconomic status (SES) is a tool that is used to assess the impact of people on their communities and is based on family income, parental education level, parental occupation, and social status in the community (Hirsch, Kett, & Trefil, 2002). SES is also used as a means of predicting behavior. As noted earlier, our participants' parents represented all walks of life and diligently worked to provide for their families. They were generally poor, but enjoyed a higher level of job satisfaction. Education wise, most participants were the first in their

families to enroll in tertiary education, and as such, it implied that participants who were already working were working in menial jobs that allowed them to live in a paycheck to paycheck fashion. The menial jobs paid enough money only to provide for their families, without a possibility of saving anything for the future. Their SES was certainly one of the causes that prompted them to further their education. In as far as the participants' choice of social work as a major, the combination of their own SES and that of their family of origin may have played a role to some extent.

It is documented that the SES of the parents plays a role in the choice of their children's major, but this standpoint is not quite definitive. Some studies claim that parents' SES is an important determinant in the educational attainment of their children (Sewell, Haller & Ohlendorf, 1970), while some others show that SES plays a negligible role in the selection of fields that lead to high incomes after graduation (Davies & Guppy, 1997). The SES argument should be analyzed and understood in the context of poverty among states. Considering the fact that the poverty of the state is a reflection of the poverty of its citizens and that poverty is highly relative (subjective), the argument of the SES and children's education can only partly explain the choice of majors.

In accordance with most of definitions of non-traditional students, most par-

ticipants had a GED® instead of a high school diploma. As discussed above, these students had to drop out of high school quite early because of personal and familial issues with parents, and at times, because of misconduct in high school. Pregnancy in junior or senior year in school, bitter divorce between parents, and delinquency issues on the student's side were some of the causes that drove them out of the educational system. After dropping out of high school some students got married, some others started working in menial jobs here and there, and a sizable number decided to take time off while waiting for an opportunity to arise. The ones who became pregnant in high school were busy raising their children. Alpha enlisted in the army, was thereafter posted in Germany, got married and started raising her own family whereas Adam, who will later on marry Noela, stayed at home waiting for another chance at life. Maureen worked as a registered nurse for 21 years before she enrolled in social work. "I went for nursing," she says, "because my daddy, the physician pushed me; I did it for him."

The ones who graduated with a high school diploma were generally re-admit-students at JAU. Re-admit-students are students who enrolled with a local college or university immediately after high school graduation, but dropped out after one or two semesters of study. Most of the time these students were out of the system before choosing a major, and if they had chosen one, it was not social

work. Alpha was among these and she recounted: "I really like science really well, I was really smart in it [science] and he (dad) always wanted me to be a pharmacist and he had a job for me and you know... I was a wild kid back then. I decided I wanted to count pills and I always did want to be in the field working with people and he told me I would wear my heart and my safety... But I would switch off to social work type class back then... I had a very strong interest in this [SW]."

Common wisdom has it that students choose their majors and future careers on the basis of their academic strengths (intellectual capabilities and social capital). In the case of our participants, we thought that past experience with social work in many of its manifestations would trigger them to choose social work as a major and potentially a career. To the question of if the participants had had any past experience with social work, their responses were quite varied and related to their personal contexts. A large majority acknowledged that they were involved with youth club organizations, such as Girl Scouts, Big-Sisters, Big-Brothers, mentoring younger people in their churches, and from time to time working on food drives (providing food to the needy, the homeless at Christmas and other holidays) in their communities. Though these activities could lead someone to choose a helping profession as a career, these characteristics are also found in the general population in varying degrees.

The points of contact with social worker(s) suggested to them through the questionnaire were Adoption, Foster Care, Juvenile Justice System, Juvenile Detention, School and Hospital Social Work, Rehabilitation, Child Support and Child Custody Transactions, Paternity Disputes, and Parents Problems. While the participants checked one or two of these as their point of contact with social work, Adam, Alpha and Leah were quite outstanding in their responses. They acknowledged having known about social work through at least six of the suggested points. Because of his father's condition, Adam came in contact with social work when his father was negotiating for social welfare benefits and with hospital social work when both father and son were admitted to hospital for their conditions. Adam was diagnosed schizoaffective for some time and the father suffered from heart disease. "Well, originally, he [my father] was an alcoholic for many years, and then had a massive coronary and then he was on medication and everything got worse..." Adam solemnly reported. "We grew up as sisters instead of mother and daughter," Leah recounted smilingly. Leah also revealed that she was in one foster home after another after she was 10 years old. She also reported that because her grandfather died when she was 8 and her grandmother when she was 9 1/2, none of the other family wanted to care for her. As a result of this, Leah came in contact with social work through Adoption, Foster Care, Juvenile Justice System, Juvenile Detention, School and

Hospital Social Work, Rehabilitation, Child Support and Child Custody Transactions from the time she was born up to the time she married and started her own family.

Social work emerged as a profession at the end of the 19th century in the United States, Britain, the Netherlands, and Germany and then spread to other countries in Europe and to Asia, Africa, Latin America, Australia, and the Middle East during the 20th century (Mayadas, Watts, & Elliott, 1997). In many countries, social work has remained committed to promoting and protecting human dignity, self-determination, nondiscrimination and equality, and the well-being of vulnerable populations. Likewise, social workers across the globe adhere to empowerment, client participation, and interracial and interethnic understanding and cooperation (Abbott, 1999). Curiously, our participants came to social work with an acceptable appreciation of human dignity, self-determination, nondiscrimination and equality, and the well-being of vulnerable populations, or they promptly learned through social work to do so. As to the question of how they would deal with a criminal sex offender, the participants answered that they would separate the offender from the offense, and treat the perpetrator according to the prevailing laws on the book. They all demonstrated in their explanations that, despite the severity of the offense, the offender would be guaranteed human dignity, fairness and

equality while the law was applied to its full extent.

The participants' preparedness for social work was also confirmed in their knowledge and developmental grasp of the Social Work Code of Ethics. Participants who had already taken the course on Ethics were more eloquent and zealous than those who had not yet taken the course. It should also be mentioned that students who had not yet taken the class had not even seen or downloaded the NASW Code of Ethics. Both groups had some of knowledge of the document and its importance to the social work profession. Though their knowledge of the Code of Ethics was limited to excerpts explored and/or referred to in class, the participants understood it to be the set of rules that govern the profession, or in short, its constitution. They defined it as the set of rules they have to stand by and be measured against in case of complaints of misconduct.

Responses to the question as to what would make them good social workers varied in their expression but remained centered on two major points: the predisposition to work as a social worker and the training one undergoes to become the same. The predisposition to work as a social worker is technically the readiness to help people overcome obstacles in their lives that are preventing them from moving forward. Most participants asserted that a social worker is a person who is genuinely interested in helping

people and caring about people without any expectation of being compensated at the end of the day. Dolores defined it more eloquently. She said a social worker is "someone who has a good heart, who is honest and trusting and can look past people's problems and see the person that they could be but just needs a little help. I think you need somebody who can manage their time and resources and to be very businesslike with what they need to do." In her intervention, Maureen drew on her personal experience to define a good social worker. This is how she confided in me: "My compassion for everybody has been something that is part of my personality for as long as I can remember; I have worked as a nurse and took care of people for a long time; have been through a lot in my personal life, a lot of different experiences, I just feel like I can advocate for anyone. I feel like I'm a very fair person." Anita, on the other hand, stressed the importance of empathy, the drive to help, the understanding, and the caring in her delivery of services.

Besides the love at the core of the social worker, all participants agreed that for one to be professionally effective and productive, a social worker needed to be trained academically and exposed to the wisdom of the many social workers who preceded her or him, and to the knowledge that they developed as they moved from being social workers to becoming better social workers. The already acquired knowledge does not only

inform us, the participants said, it also prompts us to act with confidence and speed. In unison, they all pointed to the same caveat. They pointed out that every social worker is not necessarily a good social worker as has been demonstrated in many incidents around the country. Some people become social workers to have power over other people; they are in for their personal gratification instead of doing it to help the people. By the time the interviews concluded, both the participants and the researcher had been transformed by the process. They had all become more sophisticated and equipped to collaborate in the training of future social workers.

## **Lessons Learned**

The external validity of a qualitative study rests not in its ability to be generalized to a larger population, but in its ability to be transferred to a totally new context. Despite the small number of students who enrolled in our study, our findings may compare in many ways with studies that preceded us and studies to come. That makes our study findings transferable. Our study's ambition was to uncover and understand why non-traditional students come to social work. Following are the lessons we learned.

### **1. The family**

The family being the primary setting where the socialization of children occurs, it is evident that parents have a certain

influence on their children's choice of majors. Research has verified that familial ties affect the educational achievement of students through the normative influence of the adult relatives, i.e. parents' extent of interest in their children's education significantly inspires the educational attitude and perseverance of their children (Simpson, 2001). An individual whose parents attended college may have a different understanding of the strategies required to navigate college than an individual who does not have access to such resources. Mothers are powerful forces in shaping and defining the values held by their children (Rose & Pyong, 1995). Our population, which consisted mainly of adults, was minimally exposed to the influence of their parents. Their call for further education was more or less prompted by the need to satisfy their internal longing for studies, despite the fact that they discovered quite late in life the path to success that no-one in their immediate family had trodden before them. Being non-traditional students — older than 25 years and generally first in their family to attend college — our participants had very few examples from the extended family and from their circle of friends to emulate. They used their individual wisdom and the support of teachers and older students as a compass to navigate the tertiary education sea to their destination. For some students, their age and separation from their parents who still held traditional values that restricted women to marriage and homemaking were the springboard that

propelled them to higher education. The absence of assistance from their parents, close relatives, and friends made them more determined to succeed.

## **2. Gender of the student**

Once admitted at JAU, our participants were equally exposed to the principle that students' gender is one of the most powerful and the strongest determinants of choice of academic major. It is generally established that female students are more likely than male students to pursue health related careers, business, public service, or liberal arts degrees rather than technical degree programs (Simpson, 2001). Men, according to Davies and Guppy (1997), are much more likely than are women to select fields with high economic payoffs. The situation of our participants compares with the general population of students in terms of choice of careers, and reflects the general situation of students at JAU, which is largely female and the general situation of students in social work worldwide, i.e. the profession is highly feminized with a handful of men attracted to the macro level (Duran, 1988; Hall, 2011). It is not surprising that the population in the social work department is generally female, with a scant number of Caucasian and African American men.

## **3. The students' race**

While JAU boasts racial diversity, it should be noted that its racial distribu-

tion is not well balanced. At JAU, the faculty is white with a scant number of minority faculty. It is therefore not surprising that the majority of participants were Caucasian, with a handful of African American women and only one African American man. It would not be far-fetched to say that the racial distribution of the general population at JAU and in the Department of Social Work mimics the general population of Social Work departments and schools in the U.S.

## **4. Faculty as role models**

Available literature also talks about the influence that faculty may play as a role model to the students in their choice of majors and ultimately careers. In their study, "Are Faculty role models? Evidence from major choice in an undergraduate institution", Rask and Bailey (2002) found that faculty role models, collegiate academic success, human capital, and pre-college and college socialization all played a role in the selection of a major. Canes and Rosen (1995) verified the belief that an increase in the number of female instructors correlated with an increase in the number of female students in a given department. The theory seems applicable to the general situation at JAU. In the Social Work Department at JAU, the faculty in its numerical and racial composition reflects the findings of preceding studies. This faculty consists of two women and one man; one

Caucasian, one African American, and one African. From the time of the desegregation of schools, the female population at JAU has been growing at such a fast rate that it has today surpassed the male population. The population ratio in majors traditionally considered feminine— social work; elementary and high school education; communication, nursing... — is now reaching one man versus three women.

## Conclusion

### Implications for teaching

The collected data allowed us to draw quite a clear profile of a JAU non-traditional social work major and to draw the following implications. One of the major conclusions from the participants' self-description is that the majority of the students was lacking in social capital. Social capital is considered a resource that a person can accumulate over his or her lifetime and that can be operationalized in an effort to benefit the self (Wall, Ferrazzi, & Schryer, 1998). For example, an individual whose social network provides information about college and whose parents and siblings attended college may have a very different grasp of the strategies required to successfully adjust to college than an individual whose social network does not provide access to such resources. This lack of social capital made the majority of our participants vulnerable in many situations on campus. Apart

from two students who described their families as comfortable, the majority of the participants originated from poor families where they were the first to attend college, and where the father or the mother was the only breadwinner. These students' situation calls for instructors to fill the void created by non-college attending parents, siblings, and friends by providing social support in a "Wrap Around" style. This means that, to help students adjust to the university demands and lifestyle, instructors need to provide support not only in academic area but also in the psychological and social arenas. The gaps caused by non-college attending parents and siblings are such that, unless attended to continuously by instructors and students already in the system, non-traditional students will continue to lack in many areas.

Most participants came from low socioeconomic families. Their parents made just enough to survive from one paycheck to the next. Since the literature on traditional students' access to institutions of higher education has shown that low-socioeconomic status students are less likely than high-economic status students to attend college immediately after high school (Cabrera & La Nasa, 2001; Rowan-Kenyon, 2007), it can be rightfully confirmed that the majority of students at JAU are from low-socioeconomic status families. The participants' families of origin, socioeconomic status and their own status as married and working students show a leaning toward

the social sciences (social work included) rather than medicine, engineering... This inclination does not in any way contradict their personal attraction to social work. It is, therefore, advisable that, using the person-in-situation and the strength perspective, instructors encourage students to achieve their personal ambitions. Our interviews confirmed that our participants are in social work not for the money they will derive from it, but because of the job satisfaction at the end of the day, and the peace and serenity of knowing every day they helped someone recover from whatever calamity and function well thereafter.

The majority of participants were married with children or had children born out of wedlock. Instead of hindering progress in their parents' studies, these children provided the necessary impetus to propel our participants into studying harder and regularly to complete their studies in the shortest possible time. Therefore, it is understood that, while keeping their eyes on the prize and caring about the quantity and quality of their students, instructors should show leniency on how they handled students' preparation for class and other scholarly assignments on and off campus. Instructors should inculcate in them the idea of compartmentalization of academic and social life.

Among the reasons that prompted students to choose social work as their major were the desire to help the needy, to return to the community what they

have received from it, and to avert fellow citizens' unnecessary suffering. If these values were to serve as the core for social work readiness, then, what was missing was just the academic training to make them well-rounded social workers. Using the principles of self-determination of clients and meeting the clients where they are, instructors should advise students on a one-to-one basis in order to empower them for the work ahead. Our participants came to school already drilled in most of the interactions of social work and social welfare, either as recipients or as paraprofessionals. They only needed the validation of the educational system to make them social workers.

Students' involvement with social work in their past was quite limited, but very instrumental in their decision to choose social work as a career. "I do not want what happened to me happen to anybody in the world" was a refrain that was repeated again and again during the interviews. Using the principles of Reality Therapy and Cognitive Behavioral Therapy, instructors should help students tone down their Messianic approach to life and prepare them to face their clients' lives on a one-to-one basis, knowing that there will be cases they will be able to handle and cases they will have to refer to social workers with appropriate expertise.

All participants and social work majors in general were already aware of the Social Work Code of Ethics and had read it (some sections) as part of their course contents. They all demonstrated a good grip of the laws and regulations of the social work profession, and were all ready to start working as professionals in public and private agencies. Instructors should urge students to approach the profession with the 'here and now' perspective and to continue reading the Code of Ethics in order to use it as a "light at their feet."

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