Chapter 3
Virtual Instruction in Social Service Professional Programs in Higher Education:
Going Viral

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ABSTRACT

Innovations in distance education are evident in social science programs and in helping meet the diverse needs of students. However, distance education does not come without challenges. This chapter will discuss the phenomenon of distance education specific to for-profit institutions in higher education. Moreover, this text will highlight the application of distance education pedagogy in programs that are dedicated to the fields of professional counseling, social work, and psychology. Specific recommendations will be offered to empower students and instructors who participate in distance education courses.

INTRODUCTION

Throughout history technology has always served as an important contributor and catalyst for shaping global cultures. In modern times we continue to remain dependent upon technology for improving and enhancing our daily activities of living. Without question, the 21st century has witnessed a proliferation of changes born from digital technology. Across the last thirty years our world has been introduced to digital advances and virtual technologies that have had a profound impact within our

culture. The popularity of smart phones, the pervasive use of social media, smart cars, and even drones represent just a small reference of our growing dependence on technology. While it is easy to recognize the benefits that comes from these advances, there has also been much debate surrounding the rapid growth that comes with technological change. Although change is an inevitable part of life, it does not come without some level of fear and resistance.

As most of us have been witness to the technological revolution over the last three decades, it is hard to image any aspect of our life that has not been influenced by these innovations. This Information Age has been credited with many advances in the scientific community and has served to change many aspects within our daily routines. Electronic and digital improvements have revolutionized the way we communicate with one another, how business is conducted, as well as providing a more rapid way of disseminating information. Among the many change agents born from technology, is the advent of the internet and electronic forms of communication. These digital advances have altered nearly every aspect of our lives. In fact, internet-based technology continues to evolve and as such many professions and industries have been transformed by this phenomenon. Although the spread of electronic communication and internet-based technologies have been applied in all industries, nowhere is this more evident than in the realm of higher education.

This chapter will explore the phenomenon of distance education and on-line learning programs within higher education institutions, specifically the for-profit virtual institutions. More specifically, this text will highlight the specific application of distanced learning programs that are dedicated to social service careers. Like many professional disciplines, programs that are dedicated to professional counseling, social work, and psychology have adapted to the growing need for virtual courses and on-line degree programs. As a result, the pages that follow will further examine the various methods that these universities have used to accommodate the changing needs and the virtual delivery of their curriculums. While it is easy to identify the benefits that come from virtual learning opportunities, there remains on-going debate about the quality of on-line curricula compared to traditional brick and mortar institutions. Therefore, this chapter will also provide recommendations to blend traditional pedagogical methods into the virtual learning environment.

BACKGROUND

Although some might consider distance education to be a relatively new phenomenon, college and universities have been implementing distance learning programs for several decades. In fact, virtually based and on-line platforms have been a reality in higher education institutions since the 1990's (Sheperis, Coker, Haag, & Salem-

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