Admission Variables Predicting Student Success in a Master of Social Work Program

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Abstract

The purpose of this study was to examine variables on admission applications to a graduate school of social work to discern if any were predictive of success through the program. 324 admissions files were examined at one Midwestern university over a two-year period and data was analyzed from these records and compared with graduation records and final master's level grade point average (GPA). Multiple linear regression and Pearson coefficient correlations were used to examine the data. Results showed that undergraduate grade point average and writing skills scores, when applying for the master's program, were statistically significant predictors of the final graduating GPA. Implications for the admissions process at graduate schools of social work are discussed.

Background

A great deal of time and effort is invested in the admissions process of many Schools of Social Work in the United States. Schools gather some combination of undergraduate grade point average, last 60 hours of undergraduate grade point average, undergraduate major and minor, matriculating institution, transcripts from all college level coursework, a wide range of demographic data, writing samples, supplemental essay, letters of reference, resume, number of courses completed in various categories at the undergraduate level, part or all of the Graduate Record Exam (GRE) or Miller Analogies Test (MAT), and perhaps a video introduction.

After receipt of some or all of whatever of the above materials are required by the institution, faculty and staff have assorted processes in place including possibly interviewing applicants, interviewing selected applicants if admissions review warranted such an interview, use of a faculty admissions committee to review applicants, on-site testing or writing at the school, and other variations which may or may not include a commitment to forgo a first-born child if academic success cannot be assured. Clearly, a more effective and efficient way to predict the academic and professional value of a master's level graduate could be ascertained, in order to save limited time and resources of faculty to actually mentor and assist those already admitted into such programs.

Much of the information available in the literature is dated, perhaps owing to the wide variation in admissions procedures in MSW programs, as well as changes in the field in terms of accreditation, competencies and various mechanisms employed to determine "success" as a social worker over the past decade.

Alter and Adkins (2006), in an assessment of 129 incoming MSW students' writing skills, found that one-quarter of these students did not have adequate writing skills, including the ability to build an essay using appropriate and sufficient details. They also found that one of the factors predicting good writing skills was "selectivity" of the students' undergraduate college, based upon a U.S. News and World Report ranking from 1= "most selective" to 5 = "least selective".

Additional significant mean differences on writing scores were found in student ethnicity, student status, undergraduate major and cohort type, but a multiple regression analysis to discover comparative strength of these variables found that the factors most predictive of a high writing score for the incoming class were whether the students were (a) in the regular 2-year program as opposed to the Advanced Standing program, (b) whether the students were regular admits as opposed to being on probation for a less than 3.0 GPA, and (c) whether they graduated from a more highly selective undergraduate institution.

Pelech, Stalker, Regehr and Jacobs (1999) report on the relationship between pre-admission data and later problems in the practicum and classroom for students in a graduate MSW program. In seven studies reported between 1964 and 1995 (Bogo and Davin (1989), Cunningham (1982), Dailey (1979), Duder and Aronson (1978), Jaffe (1989), Manzo and Ross (1990), Munro (1995), Neugeboren (1988), Pfouts and Henley (1977), Schubert (1964), and Specht, Britt and Frost (1984)), there were inconsistent findings related to valid predictors of graduate school success. One of these authors (Dailey, 1979), went so far as to conclude that admission criteria had little value and that students could be admitted purely on the basis of self-selection.

The Pelech et al. (1999) study found that undergraduate GPA was positively correlated with subsequent academic achievement, consistent with several of the earlier studies. Most interesting was "the counterintuitive association found between applicant maturity in terms of age and previous social service experience and later problems in the MSW program". This finding, while also consistent with some of the aforementioned previous studies, runs contrary to the thinking of some academicians and MSW admissions personnel.

Speculation by participants in the Pelech et al. (1999) study mention logical explanations for this, including adjustment demands upon returning to school, loss of income, family issues, stress and alienation, a false sense of competence, substitution (by the admitting institution) of experience for a less-than-stellar undergraduate GPA, and that faculty members and field instructors may find students with more experience and knowledge more intimidating than younger students.

The use of the GRE (Graduate Record Examination) by some schools of social work as part of admissions decisions has also come under scrutiny. Donahue and Thyer (1992) concluded that at least one subset of the GRE was not a valid method of assessment for graduate success in an MSW program. However, Dunlap, Henley and Fraser (1998) found that undergraduate GPA and GRE score, were significantly correlated with academic performance, along with applicant characteristics of race and gender.

Dunlap et al. (1998) further discuss two important methodological limitations of using the GRE, including restriction of range (sample size does not include those who were denied admission or were admitted but did not enroll), and compensatory selection (students low in one criteria might be admitted if they rated well in another). Despite the limitations of the GRE, students with higher undergraduate GPAs scored significantly higher than students with lower GPAs, students without prior paid social work experience scored significantly higher than those with prior paid social work experience and students without BSW degrees scored significantly higher than students with BSW degrees. On average, BSW students were younger, had lower GRE scores, and higher undergraduate GPAs.

GlenMaye and Oakes (2002) found that undergraduate GPA was positively related to end of the first year graduate GPA, consistent with Pelech et al. (1999). Thomas, McCleary and Henry (2004), in their study examining effectiveness of admission criteria on MSW student performance and field instruction found that undergraduate GPA and GRE scores were significantly correlated with classroom performance.

Methodology

Admissions files for MSW students from a moderate-sized school of social work at a public Midwestern university were analyzed over a two-year period from 2015-2016. The school included both undergraduate (BSW) and graduate (MSW) programs. There were 324 files analyzed, including 18 students who accepted and later withdrew or were dismissed. Student records from two small cohort groups outside the central campus were included. Graduating students over this two-year period included students who were admitted from previous years and matriculated as part-time students, but the vast majority of files reviewed were students who graduated within the standard (one-to-three year) sequence.

University analytics staff created an additional data set for all graduating MSW students these two years that included incoming GPA, graduating GPA, undergraduate matriculating institution and attendance (if any) at a community college.

Data was recorded from the summary score sheets in each file and the data set for each student. Not all files had two faculty reviews, or the second review was partially scored (often focusing on reference scoring and the Likert Scale scores for Writing Sample, Academic Preparation and Work and Life Experience. In cases where there were two reviewers, both scores were recorded.

The principle investigator (PI) read the summary sheets in each graduating student file as well as the data set provided by the university, created the coding scheme and read the coded data aloud to a graduate assistant in order to preserve anonymity. No names or other identifying information were available to anyone other than the PI. Data was entered via "Survey Monkey ©" and transferred to SPSS and SAS for data analysis.

Since all MSW students require a minimum 3.0 to graduate, defining "success" for the purpose of this study was the final recorded GPA. The MSW program is implementing incoming student self-assessment, graduating student self-assessment, and numerical scoring of practice competencies via online proprietary products and the field practicum assessments. However, at the time of this study, there were not complete data sets available to assess "success" with those items for the most recent two years of graduates.

Results

Due to the extensive number of variables involved, analysis started with a multiple linear regression analysis. This predictive model analyzes all variables and eliminates them one by one, beginning with the item of least significance, then recalculating the remaining pool of variables, eliminating the item of least significance, and continuing until the remaining variables (if any), are statistically significant. This data set showed statistical significance only in the area of "Last 60 credits of undergraduate GPA (UGPA)" and "Writing Skills" (score). No other variables from this data set were significant.

All MSW Graduates for Two Consecutive Years MSW Final GPA by Undergraduate GPA and Writing Skills Score

MSW GPA	N	Label	25th Percentile	Median	75th Percentile	Maximum
3.00-3.50	37	Last 60 credits of undergrad GPA	2.83	3.13	3.28	3.72
		Writing Skills Score	2.50	3.00	3.75	4.00
3.51-3.60	19	Last 60 credits of undergrad GPA	2.78	3.11	3.39	3.71
		Writing Skills Score	3.00	3.00	3.50	4.00
3.61-3.70	41	Last 60 credits of undergrad GPA	2.85	3.32	3.53	3.98
		Writing Skills Score	3.00	3.50	4.00	5.00
3.71-3.80	60	Last 60 credits of undergrad GPA	3.10	3.36	3.56	3.79
		Writing Skills Score	3.00	3.50	4.00	5.00
3.81-3.90	73	Last 60 credits of undergrad GPA	3.21	3.43	3.72	3.99
		Writing Skills Score	3.00	3.50	4.00	5.00
3.91-4.00	76	Last 60 credits of undergradGPA	3.26	3.50	3.79	4.00
		Writing Skills Score	3.00	4.00	4.00	5.00

This table displays the summary statistics for last 60 hours of undergraduate GPA (0 – 4) and writing skill score (0 – 5) for the final MSW GPA groups. Medians are used because the outcome (MSW GPA) is ordinal and we had to conduct nonparametric tests.

Further, Pearson Correlation Coefficients of these two variables by gender and ethnicity were complicated by the relatively low number of males (51) and non-Caucasians (55).

- There were no differences between males and females on the two variables of "Last 60 credits of undergraduate GPA" and "Writing Skills".

- For Caucasians, the correlation between MSW GPA and "Last 60 credits of undergraduate GPA" is r=0.2695 (weak correlation) and is statistically significant (p<0.0001).

- For non-Caucasians, the correlation between MSW GPA and "Last 60 credits of undergraduate GPA" is r=0.13589 (weak correlation) and is not statistically significant (p=.3091).

- The correlation between MSW GPA and "Writing Skill" score is r=0.35851 (weak to moderate correlation) and is statistically significant (p=0.0072).

- Further breakdown by specific ethnic group is problematic due to the low overall number of students within each smaller sub-group.

Discussion

Results at least partially confirmed the prior studies of Dunlap, Henley and Fraser (1998), GlenMaye and Oakes (2002), and Thomas, McCleary and Henry (2004) regarding the predictive value of undergraduate GPA (UGPA) as a marker of success in an MSW program. Two of those same studies also found at least partial predictive value from the GRE, but the present study only found statistical significance with the UGPA and the subjectively scored proprietary writing sample at this university. We cannot rule out statistical significance with the GRE or any of it's subtests, as these were not required at this program.

As is true at many universities, the school of social work contends with pressure to admit as many students as possible to capture revenue dollars from tuition, along with increasing competition from other accredited programs at nearby institutions and increasing options for on-line programs across the country. At the same time, faculty and administrative resources have been reduced or eroded through attrition, limiting the amount of time available for critical faculty examination of applicant files for admission. These results point to several strategies that could be considered to reduce the time spent on the review of MSW admissions applications, while focusing limited resources on applicants where the greatest questions of predicting academic success at the master's level may be present. Some of these solutions have the added benefit of allowing a rapid response to an applicant, which could prove helpful from a competitive standpoint, when an excellent student is considering MSW programs from multiple institutions.

1) Multiple faculty reviews did not show significant disagreement with decisions for admission (12 out of 324 or 3.7%).
2) The high degree of correlation between "Last 60 credits of undergraduate GPA" and "Writing Skills" scores with higher GPAs of graduating MSWs would suggest that students with a higher scores in these two domain scores should receive immediate admission.
3) Students who were admitted with scores below a 3.0 in either "Last 60 credits of undergraduate GPA" and/or "Writing Skills" scored lower in final MSW GPA, although it should be noted they still graduated. This is likely an indicator that the student may have struggled more academically than other students, perhaps specifically in writing (if the "Writing Skills" score was below 3.0.)

Stein, Linn and Furdon (1974) posit an issue that may affect social work educators. On one hand, we are academics with the responsibility to evaluate students with our professional judgment, and provide a gatekeeping role for the profession as a whole. One the other hand, we are social workers and are ethically bound to practice with a nonjudgmental attitude and a belief in a student's capacity to change within a strengths perspective.
The strengths necessary for students to succeed in graduate programs in general depends upon the profession they are pursuing.

Those needing advanced analytical skills need to demonstrate aptitude in the requisite mathematics, science, logic or combination of skills, so that the professoriate can be assured that higher learning is achievable, even if the effective pedagogy may be unclear or inconsistently applied based upon the needs of the individual student. In social work, this can create a conundrum related to admissions and subsequent teaching at the graduate level. Social work is a generalist field; by this we mean, by definition, the advanced (masters level) practitioner will have acquired skills demonstrating competence at the micro, mezzo and macro level. For non-social workers, this is akin to saying a graduating practitioner will be excellent in a wide range of skills in dealing with many different types of people one-on-one, in small groups, and in large settings and organizations, including advocacy, policy analysis, public presentations, research and more.

Attempting to define what types of skills indicate a bachelor's level student's preparation for undertaking such a concentrated instructional set is difficult. Strong written and verbal skills, adaptability, creativity, and intellectual curiosity seem to belong at the top of the list of important traits. Assessing those types of abilities in a meaningful manner becomes more problematic, particularly with a profession rooted in a code of ethics that embraces diversity, inclusion, equity, confidentiality and advocacy as primary underpinnings.

Undergraduate grade point averages are also impacted by grade inflation, quality of the school, choice of the faculty teaching the student, choice of course type within required content areas, and online resources such as availability of course notes, past (or current) tests, faculty and peer support, remedial assistance, etc. These variables may conspire to render the UGPA as a unreliable predictor of graduate program success, at least if used as the only measure. Writing skills are often assessed through a personal statement, a writing sample, a paper written as an undergraduate, or the answers to one or more questions that an admissions office deems relevant. Unless these are done on-site and under supervision, such written work can be easily written by another person, or at the very least edited and re-written to the point where it becomes a sanitized version of the applicant's work. These are the graduate students who may end up referred to remedial writing support while faculty wonder how they were admitted to a graduate program. We surmise interpersonal skills through reference letters from faculty or employer's, but in reality, we know that every student can find three people who will say they are an amazing human being who is perfect for this graduate program.

This brings us full circle to the existing examination of what we know from the data of graduate student success, and how we can realistically supplement this with information that we can acquire to help faculty align a prospective graduate student's potential with the skill set required by the profession, as embodied in the ethical code, licensure and accrediting bodies. We found support that undergraduate GPA and writing skills are predictive of graduate school success, as measured by the final MSW GPA. The limitations of this study, and likely of other studies that have examined this question, are that we do not know that MSW GPA equates to a highly skilled social work professional at some future point, and we do know know whether UGPA and writing skills at the end of the baccalaureate program equate to a highly skilled MSW professional in the future. So, our consideration more likely focuses on how much time and effort faculty wish to invest to move MSW students who may present at a competitive disadvantage, through a system that could remediate those issues while building on the strength-based approach touted by the profession's ethical code.

There is a wide difference between graduate schools of social work, their respective standards for admission, and the numbers of students who are admitted. Not all schools are on equal footing in terms of resources, reputation, geographic location, and many other factors. Schools can choose, through how and whom they admit, to move toward either greater exclusivity and (likely) higher achieving students, or they can choose to also work with students who, while qualified, have personal or academic challenges. Part of the conversation of how we reinvent the admissions process also depends on what we, as individual schools of social work, wish to become, as well as the support that exists within each of our institutions for any such changes.

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