



# Field Education: What Field Internship Experiences Influence Perceived Level of Cultural Competence Among Graduating MSW Students

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## **Abstract**

The purpose of this quantitative exploratory research study was to determine if field internships influence graduating Master's in Social Work (MSW) students' perceptions about their level of cultural competence when working with diverse populations in their field internships. The participants were graduating MSW students enrolled in Historical Black Colleges and Universities and two public Predominantly White Institutions located in the Southeast area of the United States. The Multicultural Counseling Inventory was used to measure participants' perceived level of cultural competence, and the Questionnaire Subscale was used to measure participants' field internship experiences. A simple regression analysis revealed a statistically significant relationship between the two variables. The conclusions from this study are preliminary and further research is needed to determine which factors actually predict graduating MSW students' perceived level of cultural competence in their field internships.

*Keywords:* field education; cultural competence; social work

Culturally competent social workers are needed as the foreign-born American population continues to grow. The U.S. Census Bureau estimated that by 2043, non-Hispanic White persons will constitute less than 50% of the population, resulting in non-Hispanic White persons becoming the minority population in the United States (Dulberger, 2017). Thus, by 2033, half of the American population is expected to

identify as a person from a racial, ethnic, or culturally diverse population (Colby & Ortman, 2015). By 2060, one in every five persons in America is projected to come from a mixed-race background or be foreign born, with the most significant increase in the Latino population, along with an increase in African, Asian, Eastern European, and Middle Eastern immigrant and refugee populations (Colby & Ortman, 2015; Dulberger, 2017).

Persons from diverse racial and ethnic groups have an increased risk of experiencing discrimination, substance use, and mental health problems in comparison to peers who do not identify as racially or ethnically diverse (Bolland et al., 2007; Jackson & LeCroy, 2009; Sanchez & Garcia, 2009; Udry et al., 2003). In a 2014 survey by The National Center for Health Statistics, Black or African American women experienced the most health disparities compared to other ethnicities, including the highest preterm birth rate and the highest rate of morbid obesity and obesity-related health problems such as high blood pressure and diabetes (Dulberger, 2017). The survey also found that Black or African American persons had the highest death rate overall in comparison to the other races and ethnicities (Dulberger, 2017). These data bring attention to how important it is for social workers to recognize the challenges that persons from diverse racial and ethnic groups may face compared to non-Hispanic White persons in U.S. society. For these reasons, social work professionals must consider the increase in diverse populations to ensure that the services provided are culturally competent.

### **Background of the Problem**

For years, social work educators have maintained that social work professionals must practice cultural competence when working with diverse populations (Lum, 2011). However, social work students at the graduate level are often not prepared to work with diverse populations competently. Researchers and educators in social work education have not sufficiently established which factors influence cultural competence and how cultural competence impacts practice and treatment effectiveness and outcomes (Hall & Theriot, 2016). Therefore, social work education programs must be charged with developing curriculums that transition from merely providing information about diverse clients to recognizing the significance of their differences, teaching social workers how to effectively communicate regardless of these differences, and emphasizing the requirements to adequately prepare culturally competent social workers (Melendres, 2022).

The 2008 Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) indicated that one must obtain knowledge about diverse populations and have insight and self-awareness regarding diverse worldviews to work effectively with diverse populations (CSWE, 2008). The 2015 EPAS second competency, Engage Diversity and Difference in Practice, indicated

that acquiring culturally competent knowledge is no longer sufficient (CSWE, 2015). Instead, culturally proficient engagement is the foundation of competent practice with diverse populations.

Certain components are required for social work students to practice competently with diverse populations, yet it seems social worker educators still experience challenges with teaching diversity content and identifying which practice behaviors students must master to demonstrate achievement of cultural competence (Jani et al., 2016). The third competency in the revised 2022 EPAS—Engage Anti-Racism, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (ADEI) in Practice—must be implemented in all social work curriculums to ensure students are learning, working with classmates, and engaging in practice with individuals from marginalized groups through an antiracist lens (CSWE, 2022). It is assumed the revisions of the 2022 EPAS will address these barriers, yet there appears to be limited research available on this topic due to CSWE's recent implementation timeline (CSWE, 2022). Currently, research shows that social work programs continue to experience challenges with preparing culturally competent social workers (Teasley et al., 2014).

In field education, the signature pedagogy of social work education, it is implied that social work professionals provide a learning environment in the field practicums for students to combine theory and practice (Boitel & Fromm, 2014). The CSWE calls for social work programs to “design, supervise, coordinate, and evaluate field education with criteria that will allow students to demonstrate achievement of program competencies” (CSWE, 2008, p. 8). Additionally, the CSWE requires that all students complete a minimum of 900 field practicum hours to obtain a graduate social work degree. Students complete a field practicum in a specialized field during their final year of the social work program. During this specialization field practicum, an expansion of the generalist field practice, students are trained for practice in a specialization area and engage in behaviors that continue to reinforce the nine social work competencies (CSWE, 2015). Because the CSWE has designated field education as a signature pedagogy, social workers across the profession agree that field experience is unique and fundamental to social work education (Boitel & Fromm, 2014).

Being a culturally competent social worker is not instinctive and requires special skills. Although diversity content is taught in social work courses, students must also practice the application of the concepts in their field placements. However, Hendricks (2003) indicated that it is unclear how field placements are used to train Master's in Social Work (MSW) students to become culturally competent and engage in practice with diverse populations. MSW students often struggle with applying concepts regarding culture, diversity, and difference in field settings with diverse populations. Limited data are available regarding how learning and the application of cultural competence content occur in field education (Levine & Murray-Lichtman, 2018).

Although prior literature discusses cultural competence in social work education and culturally competent social practice, limited data exist regarding cultural competence and diversity and its application in field education (Craig et al., 2016; Green et al., 2005; Guitele et al., 2016; Livingston et al., 2008; Nadan, 2016). Jani et al. (2016) studied cultural competence and the assessment of practice behaviors in social work education and found that further research is needed to identify which practice behaviors are required to engage in culturally suitable interventions with diverse populations. Thus, this study specifically explored graduating MSW students' perceptions about their level of cultural competence in practice with diverse populations in their final year of field practicums.

## Literature Review

### Historical Overview of Social Work Education

Historically, social work educators, field supervisors, and social work professionals have indicated a need to enhance cultural competence among social work students (Saunders et al., 2015). Educators in the social work field have recognized that teaching from a Western hegemonic-dominant cultural perspective to enhance knowledge and develop skills is impractical and devalues the unique cultural differences that professionals, educators, and students contribute to the profession (Fong, 2007; Saunders et al., 2015; Yan, 2008). Universities tend to assume their social work education program to be culturally competent when cultural competency and diversity are given priority in the social work program's mission statement, goals and objectives, curricula, training, and faculty (Saunders et al., 2015). However, this assumption could be problematic and negatively impact how cultural competency is taught in the classroom or practiced in field practicums. Saunders et al. (2015) suggested that these assumptions can cause faculty and students to be resistant to teaching and learning material on diversity and antiracism due to having a "color-blind" mindset, which can prevent class discussions on topics related to diversity and antiracism. Furthermore, students may lack motivation to engage in self-awareness and reflect on their personal experiences with privilege and social injustices, both of which are imperative to becoming culturally competent social work professionals.

Social work is a profession that requires those who identify as a social worker or seek licensure as a social worker to graduate from a CSWE-accredited program (Thyer, 2009). CSWE requirements ensure that social work programs meet national standards, provide quality education, and validate the profession of social work (Robbins, 2014; Watkins, 2009). The CSWE was established in 1951 to assume the responsibility of accrediting social work programs (CSWE, 1952). Following the development of the CSWE, the Social Work Curriculum Study was conducted to

provide recommendations for social work education (Boehm, 1959; Gelman, 2014; Robbins, 2014). This study replaced the 1932 curriculum policy implemented by the American Association of Schools of Social Work and became the new guidelines for accrediting graduate social work programs (Baskind, 2000; Gelman, 2014; Robbins, 2014). In 1968, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) began to recognize the undergraduate social work degree as a professional degree, and the Social Work Curriculum Study included recommendations for the baccalaureate in social work and discussed the differences and similarities between the undergraduate and graduate degree (Gibbs, 1995). In 1974, the CSWE implemented the first guidelines required for accrediting Bachelor's in Social Work (BSW) programs (CSWE, 1974; Gibbs, 1995; Robbins, 2014; Sheafor & Shank, 1986). Currently, the Commission on Educational Policy and the Commission on Accreditation are the two principal bodies charged with establishing policies and standards for curriculum and accreditation within the CSWE (CSWE, 2022).

Historically, the EPAS for both BSW and MSW programs were updated every 10 years; however, over the last 20 years, the EPAS have been updated every seven years (Robbins, 2014). The revisions of the EPAS have been controversial over the years, with the most compelling changes occurring in 2008. The changes implemented in 2008 required social work programs to shift from a content approach to competency-based education, which is an outcomes-oriented approach (CSWE, 2008, 2015). This transition required social work programs to (a) identify measurable practice behaviors directly related to mandated competencies established by the CSWE and (b) create measures to evaluate students' competency (Robbins, 2014). Research shows that social work educators found it problematic to develop a curriculum that met the new accreditation standards (Arkava & Brenne, 1976; Larsen & Hepworth, 1978; Robbins, 2014; Shepard & Wahle, 1981).

In the 2015 EPAS, the CSWE defined the nine social work competencies and practice skills for both undergraduate and generalist years of graduate social work programs. Additionally, the CSWE defined the nine core social work competencies and practice skills unique to the specialization practice year in graduate-level social work programs.

In 2020, the EPAS included Competency 2: Engage in Diversity and Difference in Practice. In 2022, the CSWE revised the EPAS to include Competency 3: Engage Anti-Racism, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (ADEI) in Practice to ensure social work programs incorporate ADEI in their "explicit and implicit curriculums" (CSWE, 2022, p. 16). The history of the CSWE's requirements to include diversity in social work practice, along with the CSWE's social work education dimensions, are further discussed below.

## *Engage Diversity and Difference in Practice*

In the 1960s, it was optional for social work programs to include diversity and cultural competence in their curricula (Jani et al., 2011). The political climate and pressure from faculty and students during the 1960s and 1970s influenced this shift and impacted the changes made by the CSWE (Robbins, 2014). During this era, President Lyndon Johnson issued an executive order regarding the implementation of Affirmative Action into policy; social work educators responded by implementing policies that addressed discrimination (Jani et al., 2011; Reisch & Andrews, 2001). This policy resulted in a requirement for social work programs to examine their faculty and student body for any discriminatory practices. In 1971, the CSWE approved and implemented Standard 1234, which stated,

A school of social work must conduct its program without discrimination based on race, color, creed, ethnic origin, age, or sex. This principle applies to the selection of students, classroom and field instructors, other staff, and all aspects of the organization of the program of the school. (Jani et al., 2011, p. 285)

Standard 1234 also required that each school clearly establish how they are cultivating a program that is racially and culturally diverse in their student body, faculty, and staff (CSWE, 1971).

In 1973, the CSWE established guidelines for social work programs to acknowledge race and ethnicity in their curriculums. Standard 1234A stated the following:

The primary purpose of this standard [was] to achieve the incorporation of knowledge of racial, ethnic, and cultural groups, their generic components as well as differences in values and lifestyles, and the conflicts these generate in the configuration of American society. (CSWE, 1973, as cited in Jani et al., 2011, p. 286)

The 2001 EPAS stated that social work practice should entail “practice without discrimination and with respect, knowledge, and skills related to clients’ age, class, color, culture, disability, ethnicity, family structure, gender, marital status, national origin, race, religion, sex, and sexual orientation” (as cited in Jani et al., 2011, p. 290). These changes were the first initiative of the CSWE to move from a “curriculum content to practice competencies” (Jani et al., 2011, p. 291). With the revisions of the EPAS in 2008, social work programs were required to ensure that graduates mastered competencies by “recognizing the relationship between cultural structures and oppression, marginalization, and alienation of individuals and groups; the acquisition of self-awareness to eliminate the influence of personal biases and values in practice” (CSWE, 2008, p. 5).

The 2015 EPAS competency-based guidelines were a new approach that focused on student learning. This approach included social work competencies as the guiding

principles and practice skills as the palpable activities of the competencies (CSWE, 2015). Social work programs were also required to link assessment tools to the core competencies and practice skills (Drisko, 2014). This revised approach required students to engage in practice skills that demonstrated the integration and application of social work knowledge, values, and skills to advance human and community well-being (CSWE, 2015). Social work competence also required that students demonstrate a holistic approach to competence-based knowledge, values, skills, and cognitive and affective processes (CSWE, 2015).

### *Social Work Education Dimensions*

Social work knowledge is determined to be a cognitive dimension that demonstrates mastery of the information identified in the competency (Poulin et al., 2019). MSW students can obtain knowledge through social work education by completing readings and assignments in the coursework, and in field education through practice with clients, professional development, and supervision in their field placements (Poulin et al., 2019, p. 31). Knowledge (social work values) and performance (ethical behavior and decision-making) are a part of the values dimension (Poulin & Matis, 2015). Knowledge and performance are required for students to grasp the values and ethics related to applying various social work competencies to real-life experiences. Values and ethics are essential for honest decision-making and competence as a social work professional (Poulin et al., 2019).

Social work skills are the ability to combine social work knowledge and values into practice (Poulin et al., 2019). The field placement is the space for MSW students to apply, refine, and learn social work skills. In their field placements, MSW students can implement social work theories, concepts, and methods into practice with clients or client systems (Poulin et al., 2019). Skill acquisition and application happen both in and out of the classroom setting.

Three subdimensions are associated with the cognitive and affective processes dimension: critical thinking, affective reactions, and professional judgment (CSWE, 2015). The critical thinking process involves answering the “why” question (Poulin et al., 2019). CSWE (2015) defined critical thinking as an “intellectual, disciplined process of conceptualizing, analyzing, evaluating, and synthesizing multiple sources of information generated by observation, reaction, and reasoning” (p. 20).

CSWE (2015) defined affective reactions as “the way in which our emotions influence our thinking and subsequently our behavior” (p. 20). Affective reactions are essential for social work competencies because adequate social work practice depends on the client’s cognitive and affective considerations as well as the client’s feelings, emotions, and reactions (Poulin & Matis, 2015).

Professional judgment is the decision-making process of social work practice. It is relevant to discern whether social workers use systematic or emotional reasoning (Collins & Daly, 2011; Poulin et al., 2019). As Poulin and Matis (2015) stated, “Professional judgment is reasoned decision-making based upon evidence, knowledge, analytical reasoning and practice wisdom” (p. 122).

## **What is Cultural Competence?**

Culture influences the worldviews of individuals; thus, culture is fundamental and is the primary component of how services are provided and received (Kohli et al., 2010). Social workers who have self-awareness and positive self-identities can appreciate and respect their clients’ differences (Pinderhughes, 1989). This section will define and explain why culture, competence, and cultural competence are significant to social work education.

### *Culture*

Culture is a set of fundamental beliefs, practices, and traditions that are common among individuals (Cui, 2016). Culture is built on an individual’s thoughts, feelings, and interactions with others, along with an individual’s worldview and experiences (Edwards, 2016). It is crucial to examine culture in all interactions with clients because it can be challenging to work with clients from other cultures when one is uncomfortable with their own culture. Minority social work students may experience challenges with acculturation, thus leading to more challenges when working with the dominant culture in their field placements. Therefore, social work students must have the opportunity to practice working with culturally diverse populations to understand diverse cultural histories, experiences, and general characteristics (Davis, 2012).

### *Competence*

According to the National Association of Social Workers (NASW), competence is a core value of the social work profession (NASW, 2015). Competence is defined as the ability to capably, sufficiently, and adequately perform something (Lum, 2011). When assessing professional competencies, it is essential to be able to complete specific tasks (Crockwell, 2012). In the field of social work, competence encompasses knowledge, values, skills, and cognitive and affective processes, creating a holistic view. Social work students must practice integrating and applying the social work dimensions: knowledge, values, skills, and cognitive and affective processes (CSWE, 2015; Drisko, 2014).



## *Cultural Competence and Social Work Clinical Practice*

Cultural competence education and training provide social workers with the knowledge and skills needed to work with culturally diverse individuals. In the clinical arena, it is expected that individuals in the helping professions engage in clinical practice with clients using a culturally competent lens. Students must understand that being culturally competent is a lifelong process that one must strive towards rather than viewing it as a target or end goal (Allen-Meares, 2007; March, 2004; Perry & Tate-Manning, 2006; Saunders et al., 2015). Sue et al. (2016) shared the following working definition of culturally competent practice:

[T]he ability to engage in actions or create conditions that maximize the optimal development of clients and client systems. Culturally competent social practice involves the service provider's acquisition of awareness, knowledge, and skills needed to function effectively in a pluralistic, democratic society (the ability to communicate, interact, negotiate, and intervene on behalf of clients from diverse backgrounds). On an organizational and societal level, cultural competence means advocating effectively to develop new theories, practices, policies, and organizational structures that are more responsive to all groups. (p. 67)

Sue et al.'s (2016) definition is also highly compatible with other definitions in the field of social work (CSWE, 2019; International Federation of Social Workers, n.d.; NASW, 2007, 2015). Cultural competence is a fundamental component of the social work profession; therefore, a field practicum that provides theoretical foundational experiences to understand cultural competence is significantly relevant to preparing the next generation of culturally competent social work professionals.

### **The Current Study**

The purpose of this study was to gain a better understanding of the factors that influence graduating MSW students' perceptions of their level of cultural competence when working with diverse populations in their field internships. The study participants included 82 MSW students currently enrolled in a master's-level social work program at a Historically Black College or University (HBCU) or a Predominantly White Institution (PWI) in the Southeast region of the United States who were currently completing a specialized field practicum.

### **Research Design**

This study employed an ex post facto, nonexperimental quantitative exploratory research design to determine which factors influence graduating MSW students' perceived level of cultural competence with diverse populations in their field internships. The study design included a descriptive analysis of the demographic variables and a simple linear regression analysis of quantitative data collected using

one survey. The survey comprised the Multicultural Counseling Inventory (MCI), a five-question Questionnaire Subscale (QS) (Teasley, 2005), and seven demographic questions created by the researcher (see Appendix). The following research question guided this study: What is the relationship between field placement experiences and the perceived level of cultural competence of graduating MSW students in working with diverse populations?

### *Sampling and Population*

The population surveyed for this study were graduating MSW students enrolled in a graduate social work program at an HBCU or PWI in the Southeast region of the United States who were completing their specialization year of field practicum. Students were recruited from three universities: one private HBCU and two PWIs. The three sites were selected due to their diverse student populations and alignment with the purpose of the study. The confidential surveys were completed online through Qualtrics.

The target population was a nonrandom purposive sample of graduating MSW students with an anticipated graduation date of spring 2020. The targeted goal of the sample size was at least 100 participants. However, the actual sample size was 82 students, and this sample represented a collective number of students from all three universities.

An Institutional Review Board (IRB) application was submitted to all three universities for approval. IRB approval letters were received from the IRB committees from the HBCU and one PWI. However, the IRB committee at the other PWI informed the researcher no IRB approval was required to survey the graduating MSW students, and to contact the School of Social Work directly for approval based on the School of Social Work requirements. The researcher received approval from the MSW field education director to survey the graduating MSW students. The researcher was unable to obtain the email addresses of the graduating MSW students at one PWI and the HBCU. For this reason, the MSW field education directors at each university directly emailed the students an invitation to participate in the study.

The targeted students were emailed a recruitment letter, an anonymous link, and the option to receive a \$5 gift card to Amazon as an incentive for participating in the survey. The students were aware that their responses would not impact their ability to receive the incentive; however, students were informed of the eligibility requirements to receive the gift in the informed consent.

## *Instrumentation*

The survey questionnaire used for this study comprised three sections. Section 1 collected demographic data, Section 2 was the MCI, and Section 3 was the QS. The MCI measured the students' perceived level of cultural competence, and the QS measured the following variables: social work education (QS1 and QS3), field internship (QS4), and professional training and development (QS2). However, this study only examined QS4: field internship activities and experiences.

**Survey Questionnaire Section 1: Demographic Questions.** Demographic questions were included in the first section of the survey to collect data on the characteristics of the students. The students answered questions about their age, gender, race and ethnicity, prior social work education program (e.g., BSW), college or university, MSW program currently enrolled in (e.g., HBCU or PWI), social work field internship, and experience working with diverse populations before entering the MSW program. The data collected helped the researcher identify which students had prior social work education and experience working with diverse populations.

**Survey Questionnaire Section 2: MCI.** The second section of the survey consisted of the MCI, a self-reported survey inventory used to measure the perceived level of cultural competence (the dependent variable). The MCI is a widely used self-reported measure (Sodowsky et al., 1994) based on Sue et al.'s (1992) three subscales for each multicultural competence: skills, awareness, and knowledge. The MCI is a 40-item Likert-type scale that uses a four-point response format ranging from *very inaccurate* to *very accurate*. The MCI includes the following categories: skills (11 items), awareness (10 items), knowledge (11 items), and relationship (8 items). Sodowsky (1996) added the relationship subscale to gain a better understanding of ideal relationship conditions for effective practice with culturally different clients. The MCI also focuses on social justice, the definition of diversity, coherence, and substantial evidence of its reliability and validity (Krentzman & Townsend, 2008). The MCI closely aligns with the social work dimensions, practice behaviors, and competencies established by the NASW and the CSWE.

The MCI has the most reliable psychometric characteristics compared to other instruments used to measure cultural competence (Boyle & Springer, 2001). Several scholars support the validity and reliability of the MCI (Ponterotto et al., 1994; Pope-Davis et al., 1995; Sodowsky, 1996; Sodowsky et al., 1994). For example, Green et al. (2005) studied 289 social workers completing the MCI; the Cronbach alpha score for the skills subscale was .79, the score for the awareness subscale was .76, the score for the relationship subscale was .63, and the score for the knowledge subscale was .74. Although these alphas are relatively low, other studies of different disciplines used the MCI and yielded alphas of .80 or higher (Sodowsky et al., 1994). Furthermore, the

Cronbach's alpha results in prior studies have shown continuously sufficient levels of internal consistency (Green et al., 2005). All four subscales consist of questions that measure the perceived level of cultural competence when working with diverse populations. For this study, instructions were modified to include the following: "Please indicate how accurately each statement describes you as an MSW student providing direct services to multicultural clients in your current field internship."

An MCI composite and QS composite of each participant's score was created based on their responses to each item on the MCI and QS. The perceived level of cultural competence composite was created from the participants' MCI scores and another composite was created for the following question on the QS: field internship = QS4.

**Survey Questionnaire Section 3: QS.** Section 3 of the survey was a modified version of Teasley's (2005) QS. For this study, the researcher modified the QS to include different responses to the questions on social work education, and included two additional questions to measure the student's perceived level of cultural competence obtained from field education and professional development experiences. The QS measured the field education concept and various activities related to the student's field internship experiences (see Appendix). All questions on the subscale involved a five-point Likert-type scale where 5 = *very much*, 4 = *a lot*, 3 = *sometimes*, 2 = *rarely*, and 1 = *none*, with score totals ranging from 19 to 76. For this study, field education was the primary focus.

The researcher used SPSS to compute Cronbach's alpha to estimate the internal consistency reliability coefficient of the QS for this study. Generally, the internal consistency reliability coefficient is used most often to determine reliability (Abu-Bader, 2011). The Cronbach's alpha reliability coefficient for the QS was .830, indicating excellent internal consistency reliability among the five items (see Table 1). Essentially, these numbers indicate consistent results despite when the survey was completed or who administered it.

**Table 1**

*Reliability Analysis: QS*

Cronbach's alpha	Number of items
.830	5

## Data Analysis

The researcher used a descriptive approach to analyze the demographic and quantitative data for this study. Generally, in social work research, the significance level is set at .05 to distinguish significant findings from insignificant ones (Rubin & Babbie, 2017). For this study, the statistical significance level was .05 for all analyses

performed. The researcher tabulated the data twice to ensure the accuracy of the results.

For this study, the descriptive statistics described and summarized each student's demographic profile, and a simple linear regression analysis was conducted to determine if there was a significant relationship between the independent and dependent variables. The simple linear regression test was completed to predict the perceived level of cultural competence (MCI composite measurement) based on the participant's field education (experiences; QS4). The purpose of the simple linear regression test was to examine whether an increase in field education (experiences) would lead to an increase in perceived level of cultural competence for graduating MSW students

### **Summary of Results**

The MSW field education directors emailed the recruitment letters directly to the students; therefore, it is unknown how many surveys were emailed to the students at all three universities. One hundred and one students completed the survey; however, 19 surveys were missing significant responses and were thus deleted from the study.

### **Demographics**

The first section of the survey included questions on demographic variables such as age, ethnicity, gender identity, BSW education, current MSW program, current field internship specialization, and prior experience working with diverse populations. See Table 2 for the ages of the students. Over half the students were Black or African American (58.5%), followed by 28% White students and 4.9% Asian and Hispanic students. See Table 2 for the remaining ethnicities of the students. Over 88% of the students identified as female and 7% identified as male. A small percentage (3%) preferred not to answer, and one student identified as transgender female (both transgender and female). None of the students identified as only transgender (see Table 2).

**Table 2***Demographic Profile of Participants*

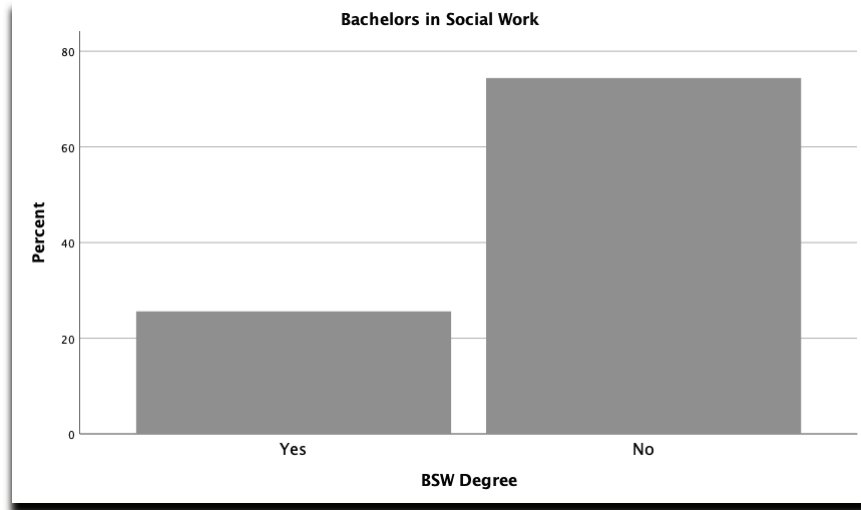
Variable	<i>N</i>	Percent	Cumulative percent
<b>Age</b>			
18–23	18	22	22
24–29	43	52.4	74.4
30–35	9	11	85.4
36–41	3	3.7	89
42–47	3	3.7	92.7
48–53	5	6.1	98.8
53–59	1	1.2	100
<b>Race/ethnicity</b>			
American Indian or Alaska Native	1	1.2	1.2
Asian	4	4.9	6.1
Black or African American	48	58.5	64.6
Hispanic, Latino, or Spanish origin	4	4.9	69.5
Middle Eastern or North African	0	0	0
Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander	0	0	0
White	23	28.0	97.6
Some other race	0	0	0
Prefer not to answer	2	2.4	100
<b>Gender identity</b>			
Male	6	7.3	7.4
Female	72	87.8	96.3
Transgender	0	0	0
Other	1	1.2	97.5
Prefer not to answer	2	2.4	100

*Note:* *N* = 82

Twenty-five percent of the students earned a BSW, and over 74% of the students earned a degree in another discipline (see Figure 1). The majority of the students (63.4%) were enrolled in a PWI (PWI 1 [20.7%] and PWI 2 [42.7%]). The remaining 36.6% were enrolled in an HBCU MSW program (see Figure 2). The students were asked about their previous experience working with diverse populations before entering the MSW program; 50% of students reported some previous experience, 26.8% reported having a great deal of experience, 19.5% students reported having little previous experience, and 3.7% reported having no prior experience working with diverse people before entering the MSW program (see Figure 3).

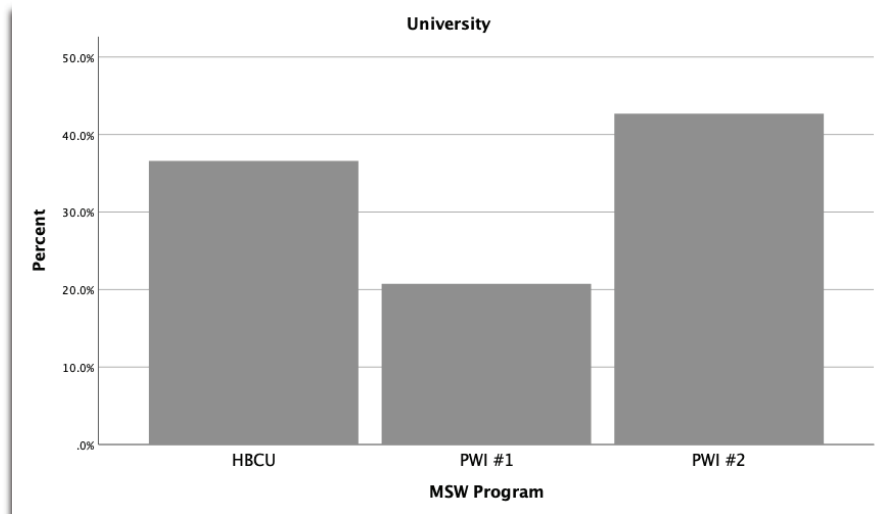
**Figure 1**

*BSW Degree*



**Figure 2**

*University: MSW Program*



**Figure 3***Prior Experience Working With Diverse Populations*

## Multicultural Counseling Inventory

On the MCI survey tool, over half of the students (59.76%) reported a high perceived level of cultural competence, whereas 39.02% reported moderate levels of perceived cultural competence and .82% reported a low level of perceived cultural competence (see Table 3).

**Table 3***MCI: Overall Perceived Level of Cultural Competence*

Level of cultural competence	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
Low = 1.0–2.0	1	.82%	.82%
Moderate = 2.1–3.0	32	39.02%	40.02%
High = 3.1–4.0	49	59.76%	100.0%

Note.  $N = 82$ 

## Questionnaire Subscale

As shown in Table 4, 39.02% of students indicated that their field internship sometimes prepared them to practice with diverse populations (QS4). Of the remaining students, 36.59% indicated that field internships prepared them a lot, 13.41% indicated that field internships rarely prepared them, 8.5% indicated that field internships very much prepared them, and 2.4% indicated that field internships did not prepare them to practice with diverse populations.



**Table 4***QS—Preparation for Practice With Diverse Populations*

Variables	Frequency	Percent	Cumulative percent
<b>Social work education (QS1)</b>			
Not at all = 1.0–1.9	1	1.2	1.2
Rarely = 2.0–2.9	7	8.54	9.8
Sometimes = 3.0–3.9	35	42.68	52.4
A lot = 4.0–4.9	35	42.68	95.1
Very much = 5.0	4	4.9	100.0
<b>Social work education (QS3)</b>			
Not at all = 1.0–1.9	1	1.2	1.2
Rarely = 2.0–2.9	14	17.07	18.3
Sometimes = 3.0–3.9	38	46.34	64.6
A lot = 4.0–4.9	20	24.39	89.0
Very much = 5.0	9	11	100.0
<b>Professional training &amp; Development (QS2)</b>			
Not at all = 1.0–1.9	6	7.4	7.4
Rarely = 2.0–2.9	25	30.49	38.3
Sometimes = 3.0–3.9	34	41.46	80.2
A lot = 4.0–4.9	13	15.85	96.3
Very much = 5.0	3	3.7	100.0
<b>Field placements (QS4)</b>			
Not at all = 1.0–1.9	2	2.4	2.4
Rarely = 2.0–2.9	11	13.41	15.9
Sometimes = 3.0–3.9	32	39.02	54.9
A lot = 4.0–4.9	30	36.59	91.5
Very much = 5.0	7	8.5	100.0

## Simple Linear Regression Results

As shown in Table 5, a simple linear regression test was performed to determine the relationship between graduating MSW students' perceived level of cultural competence and field internship experiences. The simple linear regression results indicated that the model explained 20.4% of the variance and that the model was significant:  $F(1, 80) = 20.52$  and  $p = .000$ . These results revealed a statistically significant relationship between graduating MSW students' perceived level of cultural competence and field placement experiences. These results also indicated a weak positive linear association ( $R = .452$ ) between field placement experiences and perceived level of cultural competence.

**Table 5**

*Results of Simple Linear Regression Analysis:  
Field Internship and Perceived Level of Cultural Competence*

Variable	<i>B</i>	<i>SE</i>	$\beta$	Sig.
Field placement experiences	.213	.047	.452	.000*

*Note.*  $n = 82$ ,  $R = .452$ ,  $R^2 = .20$ ,

\*Statistically significant at  $p < .05$

## Discussion

The simple linear regression data analysis indicated a statistically significant relationship ( $p < .000$ ) between the perceived level of cultural competence and field placement experiences. The estimated coefficient for field placement experiences (.213) indicated that a moderate positive linear relationship existed. These findings suggest that MSW students who engage in the field placement experiences identified in QS4 will experience an increase in perceived levels of cultural competence. Findings from the literature highlighted the significance of cultural competence in social work education and field placements.

These findings also align with a similar study by Hall and Theriot (2016), who identified which factors predict multicultural competence among BSW and MSW students. Hall and Theriot's major findings indicated the importance of integrating cultural competence within all social work courses; however, Hall and Theriot also highlighted the importance of ensuring that diversity and multicultural content are integrated into field placements and field supervisor trainings. The current study findings support those recommendations, as a large portion of the MSW students who reported a high level of perceived cultural competence indicated that field placement with clients (49%) prepared them a lot (30.5%) to work with diverse populations. The MSW students also identified field seminar courses (39%) and direct supervision (35%) as field internship experiences that prepared them to work with diverse populations. Overall, direct practice with clients—a major part of field education—had a significant impact on the MSW students' perceived level of cultural competence. Additional research is needed to identify which specific factors in field internships predict cultural competence among MSW students.

## Limitations

This study had three limitations. First, the relationship between perceived level of cultural competence and field experiences among graduating MSW students has not been studied in previous research; thus, no previous studies could be replicated. Additionally, the scope of the study was limited to graduating MSW students from

three southeastern United States universities; therefore, the study results are not generalizable to a larger sample size of graduating MSW students from other regions. Finally, the MCI and the QS were self-reported questionnaires, thus increasing the potential for social desirability bias. Green et al. (2005) posited that it can be difficult to determine if self-reported measures reflect a professional's competence in practice or if the self-reports are based on social desirability bias. Most quantitative studies related to cultural competence are based on self-reported surveys, which can lead study participants to answer questions in a manner that participants view as culturally competent (Larson & Bradshaw, 2017). The validity and reliability of self-reported data are solely dependent on students being honest and truthful in their responses.

### **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Social work field educators teach social work students the skills needed to work with diverse populations. In field settings, social work field instructors are responsible for providing students with learning experiences that allow MSW students to engage with diverse populations and promote professional development. Field instructors are required to ensure that diversity and cultural competence concepts are integrated into the field experience by explicitly identifying activities that provide students with direct client practice with diverse populations.

The findings of this study support the empirical literature on how field internship experiences are important to student learning (Cheung & Delavega, 2014; CSWE, 2015; Kohli et al., 2010; Miller et al., 2005; Wehbi, 2011). More specifically, MSW students who reported high levels of cultural competence indicated that their field internship experiences very much prepared them to practice with diverse populations. These findings suggest that MSW students who engage in practice with diverse clients in their internship feel more qualified in providing culturally appropriate social work interventions. More research is needed in this area despite the data supporting the importance of the field internship experience as it relates to becoming culturally competent. A dearth of research supports the current study findings; therefore, social work programs and field instructors must be more intentional with the integration of diversity and cultural content in field education settings.

To enhance students' cultural competence, social work field programs must (a) offer experiential learning opportunities in field seminars and field internships that include teaching concepts and topics on cultural competence; (b) provide ongoing cultural competence training to field instructors that addresses advocacy, supervision, and clinical practice with diverse populations; and (c) ensure that MSW students' learning contracts include activities that allow for the acquisition of knowledge, awareness, skills, and cultural competence on all nine social work competencies.

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## Appendix

### The Questionnaire Subscale

The Questionnaire Subscale on Social Work Education, Field Education, and Professional Development (QS) is based on your current MSW program and field internship placement and refers to course work, field education experience, and professional development.

**INSTRUCTIONS:** Please select the response that indicates how prepared you are to practice with diverse populations. Please be honest; there are no right or wrong answers. Please select only one response for each question below.

1. In your estimation, how well did the following areas of the MSW program prepare you for practice with diverse populations?

	Not At All	Rarely	Sometimes	A Lot	Very Much
MSW program courses (excluding field seminar courses)	1	2	3	4	5
Field placement with clients	1	2	3	4	5
In-service trainings	1	2	3	4	5
Direct supervision	1	2	3	4	5
Use of professional literature	1	2	3	4	5

2. How much professional development have you had in the following areas that has prepared you for practice with diverse populations?

	Not At All	Rarely	Sometimes	A Lot	Very Much
Workshops	1	2	3	4	5
Use of professional literature	1	2	3	4	5
Certificate programs	1	2	3	4	5
In-service trainings	1	2	3	4	5

<b>Direct supervision</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Webinars</b>	1	2	3	4	5

3. How well did the following areas of social work education experiences prepare you for practice with diverse populations?

	<b>Not At All</b>	<b>Rarely</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>A Lot</b>	<b>Very Much</b>
<b>Social work classroom activities</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Social work service-learning assignments</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Social work diversity events</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Use of professional literature</b>	1	2	3	4	5

4. How well did the following field experiences prepare you for practice with diverse populations?

	<b>Not At All</b>	<b>Rarely</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>A Lot</b>	<b>Very Much</b>
<b>Direct supervision</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>In-service trainings</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Field Seminar</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Field placement with clients</b>	1	2	3	4	5

5. How well did the following experiences prepare you for practice with diverse populations?

	<b>Not At All</b>	<b>Rarely</b>	<b>Sometimes</b>	<b>A Lot</b>	<b>Very Much</b>
<b>Social work education (excluding field education/internship)</b>	1	2	3	4	5

<b>Overall formal education (degree programs)</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Professional development (not counting degree programs)</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Overall informal experiences (personal and social)</b>	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Field Education/ Internship</b>	1	2	3	4	5

Adapted from Teasley, M. L. (2005). Questionnaire Subscale on Social Work Education and Professional Development.