

The Social Work Learning Climate: An Assessment of Implicit Diversity and Inclusion Curriculum

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Upon graduation, BSW and MSW students are given a survey to take that evaluates the Department of Social Work and Gerontology at Shippensburg University. The survey attempts to address student views on how implicit curriculum related to anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion was embedded in the program. Along with this, the surveys have helpful information that assists the department in the reaccreditation process. This article aims to investigate areas where the department did well and areas that need improvement, based on student responses. Student responses indicated the department does well in discussing diversity and acceptance; however, there are less positive responses when discussing general support students feel from the department.

Anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion (ADEI) are important foundational values needed for professional social workers. Because of this, the social work accrediting body, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), requires that ADEI be included in social work curricula. The CSWE also requires that programs provide evidence of their ADEI content by assessing both explicit and implicit curricula in their overall program environment.

The carefully crafted social work curriculum prepares these future practitioners through coursework and training to address, advocate for, and educate others on social justice issues. The department tries to insert implicit curriculum regarding diversity and inclusion within the classroom and through events held on campus, such as the annual Racial Justice Teach-In, guest speakers, inclusive literature, and much more.

Existing studies have explored why ADEI and Critical Race Theory in social work education is essential in helping BSW and MSW students understand theories that will impact their careers (Minnick et al., 2022; Dunkerly et al., 2024; Sosa & Tabahi, 2025). Other institutions have examined their curriculum and potential adjustments to better represent ADEI in their programs (Alexander et al., 2024; Alford et al., 2019).

At Shippensburg University, graduating BSW and MSW students complete a survey with questions that ask about their educational experience and preparation. Review of the results from these surveys is crucial in assisting the department in its accreditation renewal, as well as providing critique and positive feedback on changes that can be implemented to strengthen the program.

LITERATURE REVIEW

As of 2022, the Council on Social Work Education [CSWE] began requiring universities to adopt ADEI (Anti-Racism, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion) approaches in curriculum (Dunkerly et al., 2024). CSWE requires that social workers understand forms of oppression and the creation of privilege and power (CSWE, 2022). This ADEI content is to be infused in both the traditional curriculum and what CSWE calls "Implicit Curriculum." This concept of implicit curriculum is defined by the CSWE as follows:

"The implicit curriculum consists of the student learning experience and the program context or environment. The implicit curriculum includes the following elements: student development, admissions, advising, retention, and termination; student participation in governance; faculty; administrative and governance structure; and resources" (CSWE, 2022, p. 24).

Implicit curriculum involves showing a commitment to diversity throughout the institution and the learning environment (Minnick et al., 2022). It should be noted, however, that curriculum developers sometimes use “blanket terminology” like antiracism, diversity, equity, and inclusion without understanding the specific differences in these terms. The broadness of the words leaves matters up to interpretation and can dilute the effectiveness of the ADEI interventions (Alexander et al., 2024, p. 15). An effective ADEI implicit curriculum clearly impacts social work students and faculty, but it can also have a positive indirect effect on the broader campus community (Alexander et al., 2024, p. 24).

The remaining sections of this literature review focus on all the areas of ADEI and their place in the social work curriculum.

Anti-Racism and Implicit Curricula

Alexander et al. (2024) cite Kendi’s (2019) definition of anti-racism as follows: “Antiracism recognizes the concept of a racial hierarchy and power differentials and confronts these racial inequalities and inequities in policy, practice, and attitudes to dismantle the root causes of systemic oppression to create equitable outcomes” (p. 15).

Teaching anti-racism often includes focusing on working through three zones described by Ibrahim (2020) in his work titled “Becoming Anti-Racist.” Ideally, implicit curriculum initiatives help move students from the “fear zone” to the “learning zone” and then to the “growth zone” (Minnick et al., 2022, p. 273). Faculty at Shippensburg University use this theoretical framework to assist students in evaluations of themselves and in battling discomfort (Minnick et al., 2022, p. 273).

Diversity and Implicit Curricula

Diversity in the social work curricular context is defined by various authors as the outward and subjective representations of the ways individuals or groups differ from mainstream society by intersectional identities, including race, gender, religion, sexual orientation, etc. (Alexander et al., 2024; Azzopardi & McNeill, 2016; Woo et al., 2022).

Social work education must continue to improve the way it engages with curriculum through others’ lived experiences, not those based solely on white authors or practitioners (Alexander et al., 2024). Addressing and valuing difference in social work is also an important way that social work practitioners can work effectively across all levels of social work practice (Azzopardi & McNeill, 2016).

Equity and Implicit Curricula

Equity is defined in the literature as an active practice that improves access, opportunity, and advancement for all people by deliberately identifying and eliminating the root causes of barriers faced by historically oppressed groups (Alexander et al., 2024; Shinnars, 2021).

Within social work education, social justice and equity are promoted through examining historical biases embedded within curriculum (Sosa & Tabahi, 2025, p. 2). It is also important to acknowledge white culture’s dominance and show a commitment to center education on Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC) students (Alexander et al., 2024, pp. 23-24).

Inclusion and Implicit Curricula

Finally, a popular definition of inclusion comes from Shinnars (2021): “The act of creating environments in which any individual or group can be and feel welcomed, respected, supported, and valued to fully participate” (p. 58).

Noted techniques to address inclusion in social work curriculum include using texts and ideologies that portray BIPOC knowledge and lived experiences (Alexander et al., 2024, p. 15). Previous research (e.g., Keeney et al., 2024) has emphasized that the faculty should include representation of those who have different lived experiences to enhance the inclusivity experienced by students.

The purpose of this study is to report on an assessment of the ADEI-related implicit curriculum in the social work curriculum and determine whether the implicit curriculum is improving the learning environment for students of all backgrounds.

METHODOLOGY

Context for the Study

Shippensburg University's social work faculty are working through the reaccreditation process with CSWE. Ideally, this process will enhance the department's goals of instilling an ADEI ethos across the curriculum—including the implicit curriculum. Programs accredited by CSWE are required to assess their implicit curriculum as instructed in the following related CSWE accreditation standard: "The program has a process to formally review its ADEI assessment plan and outcomes. The program makes specific changes to its implicit curriculum based on its outcomes, with clear links to data" (CSWE, 2022, p. 36). In the context of this study, that assessment is based on responses from graduating BSW and MSW students.

Measurement

This study used previous submissions of a mixed-methods survey distributed to BSW students (26 items) and MSW students (18 items) graduating in the Spring of 2025. The surveys were sent out via email by the department for students to complete.

Quantitative measures

The quantitative measurement for both BSW and MSW students focused on responses to the following five questions that all began with the phrase "Reflecting on your experience in the Master's/Bachelor's of Social Work (MSW/BSW) Program, please indicate to what extent you agree that the MSW/BSW program provides a learning environment . . ."

- . . . that accepts who you are.
- . . . that models respect for diversity.
- . . . that respects differences.
- . . . that is supportive of you as a student.
- . . . that supports students with diverse identities

Students could respond to these questions using a six-point Likert scale ranging from "Very Strongly Agree" to "Very Strongly Disagree."

Qualitative measures

The following open-ended questions were included in the MSW version of the survey:

- How have you changed in terms of the way you think about issues of diversity, inclusivity and difference due to the MSW program?
- Please identify events or activities in the MSW program that had a particular impact on your learning regarding diversity and inclusivity.
- How could the MSW program improve the inclusivity of the learning environment?
- What else would you like us to know about you which is relevant for this survey? Please, provide any additional comments

For the BSW students the following additional open-ended questions were included in the survey:

- Please add any additional details or explanation about your plans or thoughts for employment here.
- Please add any additional details or explanation about your plans or thoughts about graduate school here.
- What worked well to support your academic and professional growth while in the BSW program?
- What could have been done better to support your academic and professional growth while in the BSW Program?
- What else would you like us to know?

Data Collection Procedures

All graduating BSW and MSW students were invited to participate in this assessment at the end of both the Fall and Spring semesters. The goal was to have all—or as many as possible—of the graduating class at each level complete the survey. An electronic survey was created by the department and distributed using Qualtrics software.

Sample

The final sample for MSW students consisted of 61 total responses. The final sample for the BSW students consisted of 23 total responses. Tables 1 and 2 summarize the demographics of the MSW and BSW samples respectively.

Protection of research participants

None of the data provided in this research project included identifying information either at the point of collection or when the data source was provided to the researchers. In addition, this project and research procedures received full approval from the university Committee on Research with Human Subjects.

Data Analysis

Quantitative analysis focused on analyzing student responses to the five quantitative questions, with particular focus on different demographic groups' responses to those questions. Analyses were conducted using Google Sheets, Microsoft Excel, and SPSS, and included frequencies, measures of central tendency, t-tests, and effect sizes.

Qualitative analysis focused on the responses to the open-ended questions in the surveys. Responses were uploaded to ChatGPT for initial organization, followed by the research team conducting the following qualitative analyses inspired by the works of Strauss and Corbin (1998): open coding to identify themes, axial coding to compare negative and positive responses, and selective coding to try to find the overall meaning or “story” the data were telling the researchers.

RESULTS

Quantitative findings

Figure 1 provides an overview of average scores on the Likert scale questions in the survey for MSW and BSW students. Generally, MSW responses (Mean = 5.14, SD = 0.93) were lower than BSW responses (Mean = 5.53, SD = 0.68) across the five quantitative questions.

Figure 1 also shows that, for both MSW and BSW students, the consistently lowest-ranked of the five questions was the one ending “... that is supportive of you as a student.”

With the MSW population, independent samples t-tests comparing average quantitative scores for the following groupings were not significant: regular program students vs. advanced standing students; students with an undergraduate degree in social work vs. other majors; generalist year students (500 level courses) vs. specialization year students (600 level courses); students in the online program vs. those in the face-to-face program; and students of color vs. white students. These results are summarized in Table 3. Because of the number of t-tests conducted, a Bonferroni correction reduced the significance value for these tests to 0.01. As a result, none of these comparisons were statistically significant.

A comparison across genders in the MSW program was not feasible due to small numbers in the various groups. Because of the small numbers in the BSW sample, a similar series of t-test analyses were not conducted.

As summarized in Figure 2, MSW students' scores on the five quantitative questions showed that, on average, responses by students of color were very similar to those of white students in the MSW population.

Because each of the quantitative questions dealt with a slightly different ADEI-related topic, more in-depth analysis of responses by white students and students of color was conducted to see how each group responded to each question on average. The results presented in Figure 3 show more mixed results across the various groups than when looking at the entire MSW student population, with students of color rating the program only slightly higher than white students on the question related to “Models respect for diversity.”

The racial and ethnic breakdown for the BSW participants was somewhat different and the sample size was smaller. BSW findings illustrated in Figure 4 show that BSW students of color rated the department slightly higher on average than their white counterparts. It should be noted that the number of BSW students of color in this sample is quite low, and results were influenced by an outlier who scored the department very highly.

When looking at the individual questions asked in the quantitative section of this survey, the BSW responses shown in Figure 5 reflected the trends from the overall averages reported previously. The same cautions about low numbers of students of color and outliers apply to this figure as well.

Table 1. Demographic Summary of MSW Respondents.

MSW Demographics		n	%
Undergraduate Major	Social Work	37	60.66
	Other	23	37.70
	Missing	1	1.64
Program of Study	Regular Full-Time	18	29.51
	Regular Part-Time	17	27.87
	Advanced Standing Full-Time	12	19.67
	Advanced Standing Part-Time	14	22.95
Time in the Program	One School Year	23	37.70
	Two School Years	36	59.02
	Three School Years	2	3.28
Year in Program	Generalist (500 level classes)	27	44.26
	Specialization (600 level classes)	34	55.74
Type of Program	Face-to-Face	17	27.87
	On-line	44	72.13
Recognized Disability	Yes	8	13.11
	No	53	86.89
Gender Identity	Female/Woman	56	91.80
	Male	4	6.56
	Non-binary/Gender Diverse	1	1.64
Race/Ethnicity	White	44	72.13
	Black/African American	11	18.03
	Hispanic/Latino	4	6.56
	Asian/Pacific Islander	1	1.64
	Prefer not to Answer	1	1.64

Qualitative findings

When looking at responses from the MSW students, the axial coding process showed that there were primarily positive responses when asking about events or activities that impacted students' learning regarding diversity and inclusivity. The open coding process showed that guest speakers, training, and campus events were cited as particularly meaningful. In addition, MSW students said events like the Racial Justice Teach-In, Trans Day of Remembrance, Narcan training, and the Disability Film Series were impactful for them.

The axial coding procedures showed that many respondents shared that class discussions, readings, and assignments were effective in helping to learn ADEI-related content. A consistent theme from the open coding process showed that nearly all MSW courses integrated ADEI topics. Specifically, MSW students reported that classes addressed inclusivity and diversity in the assignments and that books like *Caste* and *The Sum of Us* changed student thinking.

Table 2. Demographic Summary of BSW Respondents.

BSW Demographics		n	%
Program	Main Campus	19	82.6
	Degree Completion Cohort Program	4	17.39
Transfer Student	Yes	12	52.17
	No	11	47.83
Years in the Program	Two School Years	10	43.48
	Three School Years	5	21.74
	Four School Years	8	34.78
Gender Identity	Female	18	78.26
	Male	3	13.04
	Non-binary	2	8.70
Race/Ethnicity	White	16	69.57
	Black/African American	6	26.09
	Hispanic/Latino	1	4.35
Disability Status	No Disability	17	73.91
	Yes, and Not Officially Registered	4	17.39
	Yes, and Officially Registered	2	8.70
Employment Status	Work More Than 20 Hours	13	56.52
	Work less than 20 Hours	7	30.43
	Not employed	3	13.04

Table 3. T-test findings.

		n	Mean	SD	T	Df	p*	Cohen's d
Program	Regular	35	4.91	1.01	-2.51	59	0.015	-0.65
	Advanced Standing	26	5.46	0.56				
Undergrad. Degree	Social Work	37	5.32	0.62	2.22	58	0.030	0.59
	Other	23	4.81	1.15				
MSW Level	500 Level	27	4.97	1.09	-1.38	59	0.174	-0.36
	600 Level	34	5.28	0.67				
Program Delivery	Online	44	5.20	0.69	0.79	59	0.43	0.26
	Face to Face	17	5.00	1.27				
Race/Ethnicity	Students of Color	18	5.08	0.71	-0.43	58	0.67	-0.12
	White Students	42	5.19	0.95				

*None of the above t-tests would be considered significant based on a Bonferroni corrected significance value of 0.01

Fig 1. Summary of Quantitative Responses.

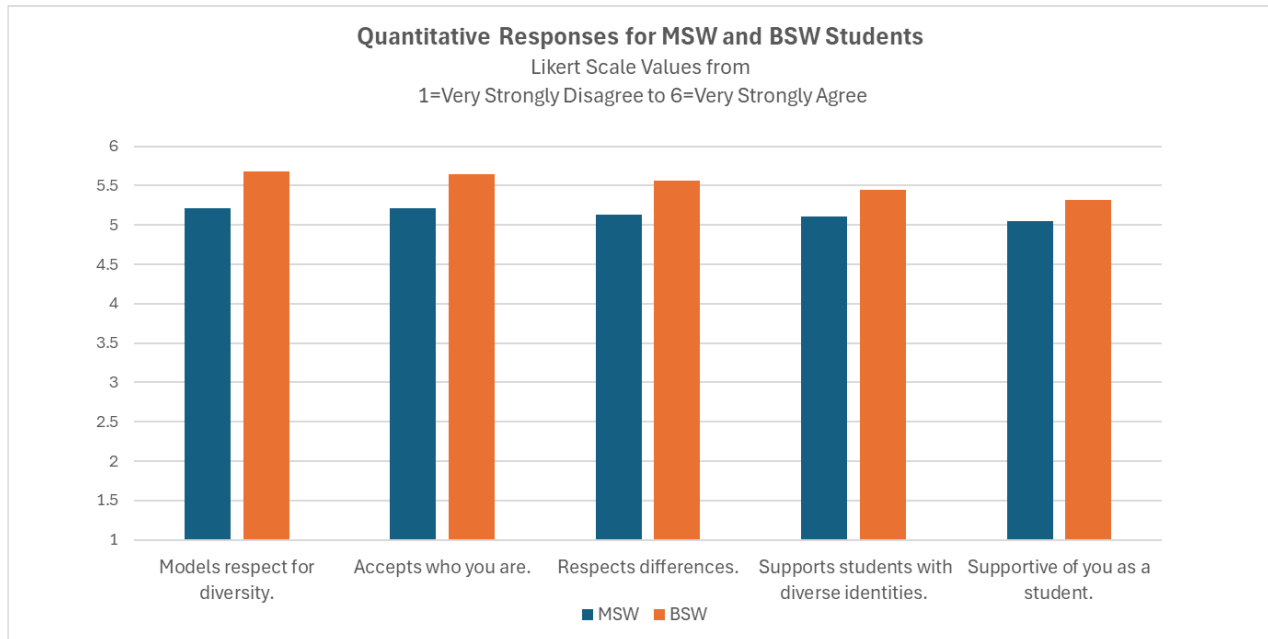


Fig 2. Average of all MSW Scores on Quantitative Questions by Race/Ethnicity.

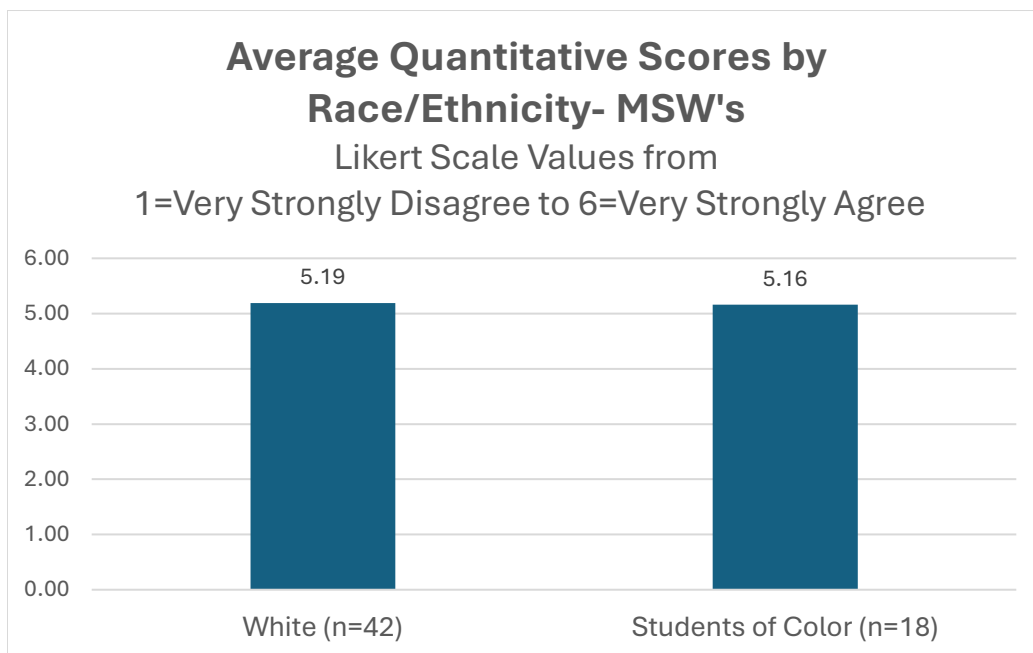


Fig 3. MSW Quantitative Responses by Question and Race/Ethnicity.

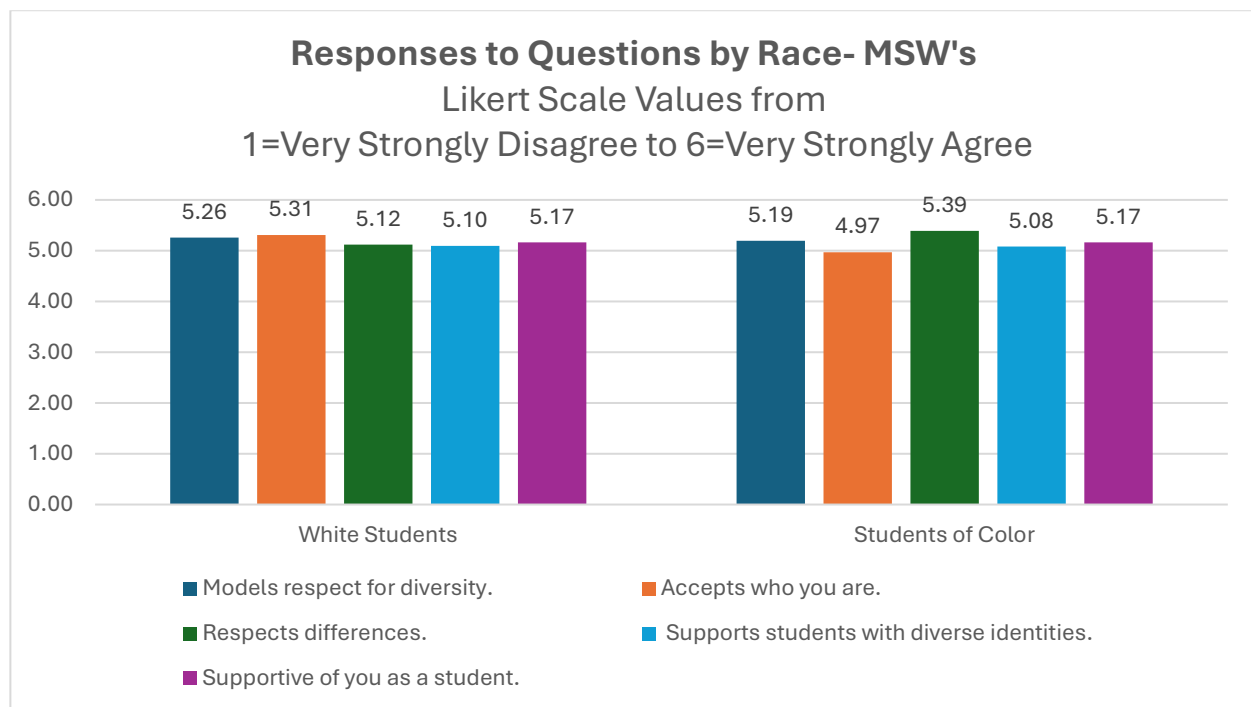


Fig 4. Average of all BSW Scores on Quantitative Questions by Race/Ethnicity.

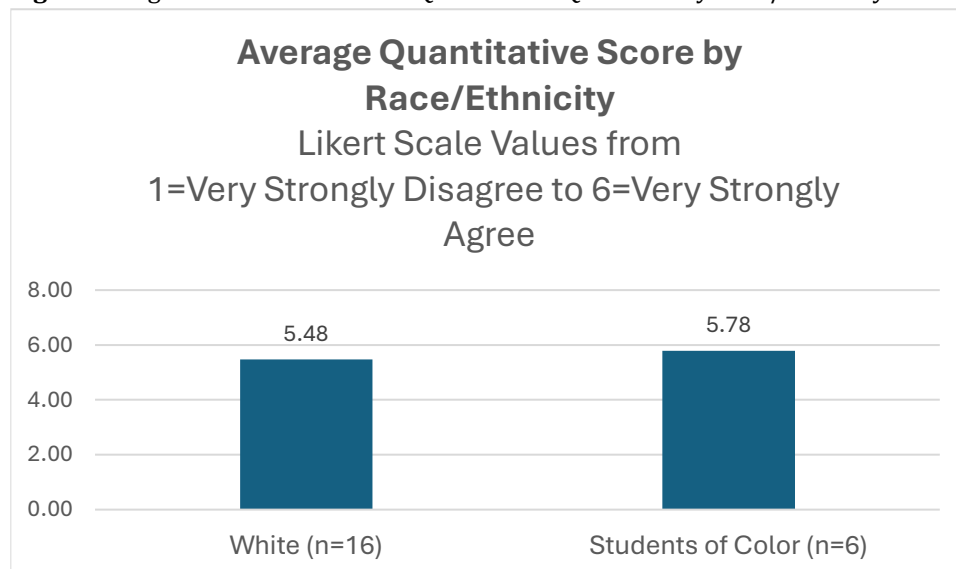
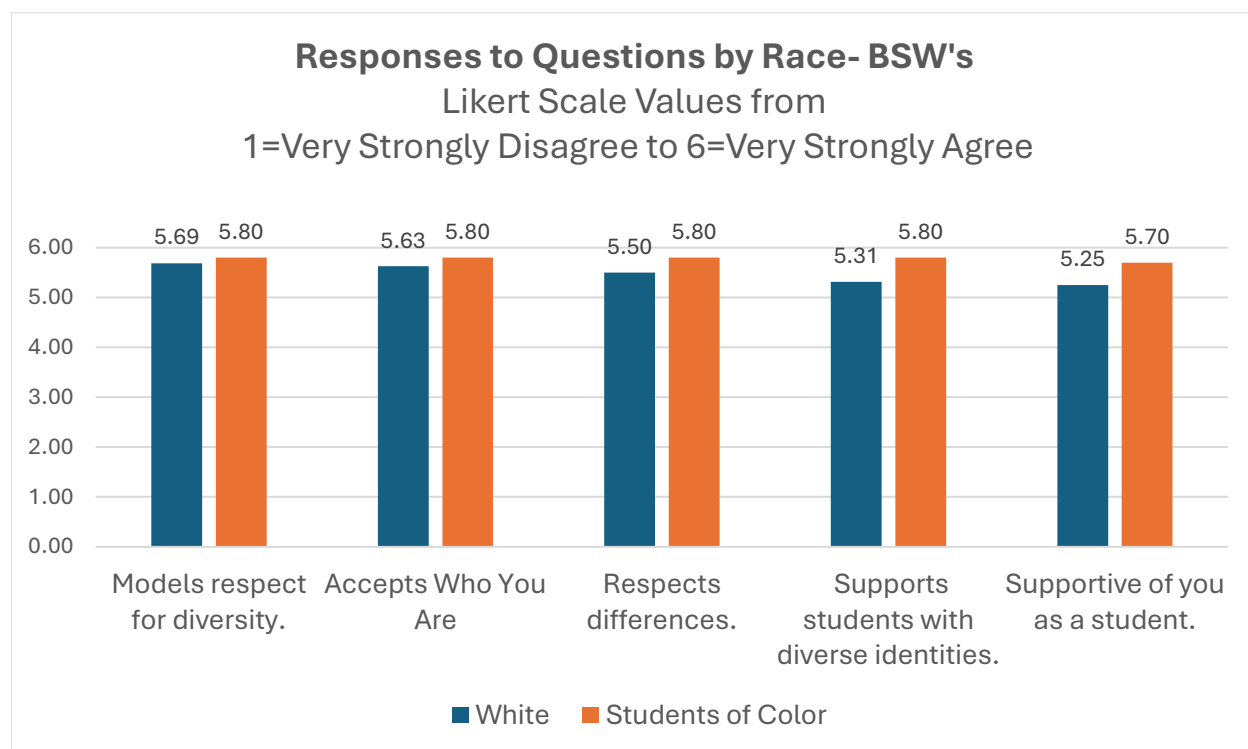


Fig 5. BSW Quantitative Responses by Question and Race/Ethnicity.



Not surprisingly, major themes identified in the open coding process of MSW student responses were that activities and internship experiences positively impacted students. Many MSW students said that their field placements were effective in providing exposure to diverse clients such as undocumented youth, clients in correctional institutions, and individuals looking for gender-affirming care. One student reported, “My internship allowed me to work with undocumented youth and other marginalized communities which had a profound impact.”

When assessing the classroom environment in the axial coding process, many responses were positive and open coding themes highlighted certain professors who created an inclusive space, showed cultural humility, and encouraged students to think critically. However, the combined axial and open coding process also showed themes where students felt that improvements could be made with things like faculty flexibility and understanding the complexities of students’ lives, better communication/organization, fewer adjunct faculty, and a general call for more diversity and inclusion events.

The open coding process showed that BSW students also reported having strong personal and professional growth in understanding bias, privilege, and intersectionality. Many BSW graduates stated that they had an increased sense of self-awareness and a greater willingness to examine their internal biases. Undergraduate students described LEAD Day, the Racial Justice Teach-In, and practice classes (e.g., Practice with Individuals, Practice with Families, and Practice with Organizations and Communities) as impactful experiences.

The axial coding process showed that areas where BSW students feel the department needs to improve include more hands-on experiences beyond the internship, more understanding from professors about real-life circumstances that impact in-class attendance, more support for nontraditional students, and better accommodations for students with disabilities.

The general “story” that seemed to emerge from the MSW and BSW selective coding analysis is that all types of support are important for students. This includes supports around areas related to ADEI content but also the general need to approach students with compassion and genuine understanding when they face the inevitable struggles of undergraduate or graduate education.

DISCUSSION

The findings reported in this paper paint a picture of the academic environment and overall learning climate for social work students. Across the quantitative analyses, the primary theme was a lack of major differences among the responses of the various groups in the student body, e.g., white students vs. students of color. This could suggest that students across demographic groups are experiencing the program's ADEI content somewhat equally.

Another key quantitative finding is that improvement is needed in general support from faculty and the department for both BSW and MSW students. The questions related to the program being "supportive of you as a student" were often rated the lowest in both BSW and MSW programs. The good news here is that with more specific ADEI-related areas, the department is faring well—relatively speaking. Students rated the questions on acceptance, diversity, respect for differences, and support for students with diverse identities higher than the question about general supportiveness.

The qualitative data analysis also suggests that ADEI content is being integrated into the implicit and explicit curricula. Students' survey responses indicate that they have been trained and given ADEI exposure both within and outside the classroom. Through support, coursework, and core classes such as the social policy courses, many students have shared the belief that the program empowered them to speak confidently about topics that are often deemed uncomfortable and to adopt a new perspective on the true meaning of ADEI. This new lens has inspired students to "continue to do the work," as their professors often put it—to stay informed, to stay educated in these matters, and to use their platforms and voices to educate others.

There may be some issues with performativity in these findings, however. Keeney et al. (2024) state that performativity "refers to how individuals use language or engage in behaviors that appear to support change-oriented action but fail to result in substantive or actionable change" (p. 437). The students who responded to these surveys may have been less likely to negatively rate the ADEI-related areas in this evaluation because that might show a lack of support for such ideas and related initiatives. At the same time, they may feel very comfortable identifying with and giving a low rating to areas like faculty support—areas not explicitly related to ADEI content.

There is a hint of hesitation in the student responses when it comes to responding critically to ADEI-specific questions. Critical thinking and critique in general are key aspects of ADEI concepts and curriculum (Keeney et al., 2024; Tabahi & Villarreal Sosa, 2025). Yet when we looked at the qualitative responses and coded for critical or negative content, most of the critiques did not deal with issues like the depth of the ADEI content and analysis in the classroom. Rather, students mentioned issues like course design problems, lack of macro focus, field practicum issues, and the burden of group assignments. This again shows that students may not have developed the critical ADEI lens as thoroughly as the faculty would have liked because students are primarily focused on issues of general student support in their responses.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

The quantitative and qualitative data presented here provide some promising indication of successful integration of ADEI content in the implicit and explicit curriculum. However, integrating content into the curriculum is only the first step. A deeper, longitudinal follow-up analysis of the actual integration of ADEI content in the thinking and practice behaviors of social work alumni might demonstrate the long-term personal impact away from performativity and towards real critical thinking and critique with regard to important social justice issues.

LIMITATIONS

Clear limitations exist in this study. These include the fact that the sample size was small and did not represent the diversity that is present in many social work programs. Most students who completed the surveys were white women. With fewer respondents from other diverse backgrounds, feedback provided on these surveys lacks a true cultural perspective of the voices that should be projected the most.

Social science research supports the idea of social desirability bias in student self-report surveys, and in this case, students of color especially might not give an honest opinion while completing the survey (Miller, 2011). This is a particular concern, as students often plan to use professors as references after graduation and worry about maintaining strong bonds shared with professors as they continue their careers or enroll in the department's MSW program.

Because most of the ratings by students were near the top of the Likert scale, a ceiling effect reduced the variation in scores between the students in the two social work programs. This impacted much of the statistical analysis in the study.

Lastly, the survey is not made mandatory for completion of the program and students are not given an incentive to complete it. After a long academic journey and overload of coursework, some students decided not to complete the survey, thus providing the department with less feedback from an already small graduating class.

CONCLUSION

The preceding analysis of the learning environment in this social work department shows that there is an evident commitment to including ADEI content in the curriculum—both explicit and implicit. However, it was difficult to tell whether the student responses showed real personal integration of ADEI-related content into their personal beliefs and thus their future professional behaviors. That said, the overall sense from this analysis is that the effects of the department's ADEI efforts are having an impact and that impact is being felt equally across the student population.

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ENDNOTES

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