



TEACHING GRIT

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Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Introduction	3
Social Issue Exploration	3
Online Education Efficacy	6
Retention Crisis	8
Retention Strategies	10
Educational Stressors	11
New Paths	12
Applicable Theories	16
Conclusions	20
References	21

Abstract

The world has mounting social issues that call for a new wave of educated social workers to answer. Universities are actively developing new online education programs to meet this call for new social workers and answer the need behind it. Social work online higher education programs are becoming the best avenue to offer quality learning arenas to a wide consumer base in the most efficient and cost effective way. The efficacy of these programs has been questioned, but research shows they are on par with onsite educational experiences. The online social work education programs want to study how to increase online student retention in order to assist students in their programs to successfully complete. This paper offers an overview of the literature related to online higher education learning in social work, as well as, similar helping professions. The need for good stress management skills has been identified as key to being successful in online social work education programs, although there is little in the literature regarding what good stress management entails. Leaders in the field have drawn out the concepts of persistence and grit as important to this process. The course project is to outline how to improve stress management through the exploration of grit and persistence development strategies in online social work students so that retention improves resulting in higher graduation rates. The resultant social change of higher graduation rates for online social work programs is more trained social workers entering the workforce ready to help the world with its growing issues.

Introduction

This course project currently embarked upon is to develop a quality leadership plan for online social work education to deal with the issue of poor retention rates. The belief behind this leadership plan is that by improving the online social work student's capability to manage the anxiety of their online educational programs an improvement in their retention through graduation will follow. Therefore the leadership plan outlined in this preliminary paper will proceed from a position that helping online social work students learn good coping skills to deal with their educational stressors will assist them in being successful in finishing their online education programs successfully through graduation. This paper seeks to explore a meaningful gap in the literature regarding what specifically helps online social work students manage the stress of the online educational programs and will endeavor to develop a leadership plan to address this.

Social Issue Exploration

There is no doubt that this world needs more trained social workers. Just examining the current statistics provided by the U.S. Census Bureau shows that 15% of U.S. citizens live below the poverty line (Reamer, 2016, p. 1). This is a significant issue as it impacts families and children in our society every day. The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services indicates receiving roughly 2 million reports of child abuse and/or neglect every year as reported by (Reamer, 2016, p. 1). The long term effects of this trauma on children on the U.S. society cannot be fully calculated. It has been further reported by the U.S. Surgeon General that 20% of U.S. citizens are affected in some manner by mental illness (Reamer, 2016, p. 1). The maladaptive actions of an untreated mentally ill individual can impact literally thousands of lives. The U.S.

Department of Justice report that more than one in 100 Americans is incarcerated (Reamer, 2016). The cumulative effects of these conflicting social issues are staggering and explain why today more than ever the world needs social workers. Social workers help clients address issues of concern in their lives, cope with trauma, navigate mental health systems, access resources, and live in healthier ways.

It make perfect sense then that Universities utilize statistics like these identified as well as others to chart growing trends in our society and projecting what new demands there will be for job roles in the future. Due to this, today's universities are designing new online educational programs for students to get a social work degree from absolutely anywhere in the world at their own pace. New educational programs, especially undergraduates ones, are growing substantially (Cross, 2013). This is particularly necessary for a field like social work where societal issues are causing a demand for new social workers that is anticipated to surpass the number of graduated social workers (Blackmon, 2013). These new online social work educational programs strive to offer a high degree of flexibility while guaranteeing a high quality educational experience. The world will need more social workers than are predicted to graduate from traditional educational programs so online program is the key to meeting the growing societal needs.

The impact of this demand driven process is that current research shows a substantial rise in new enrollment in online social work higher education programs (Kurzman, 2013). Programs that are offered globally allowing for students from across the United States and internationally. The statistics regarding the number of new online social work program available in the last 15 years are significant. The Council on Social Work Education Commission on Accreditation reports that from 2001 to 2015, the full time enrollment in online Bachelors of social work programs has grown 5.2%, whereas part time enrollment in Bachelors of social work programs

enlarged 9.1% (2016).). The Council on Social Work Education Commission on Accreditation further notes that enrollment in full time online Masters of social work programs has grown 25.7% as well as part time online Masters of social work programs grew 16.1% during this time period (2016). Finally the Council on Social Work Education Commission on Accreditation reports that between 2011 to 2015 enrollment in full time online Doctoral social work programs grew 1.4% while enrollment in part time online Doctoral social work programs declined by 37.9% (CSWE, 2016). This reflects social work education attempt to evolve in order to meet the demands of the world's growing social issues.

The Council on Social Work Education Commission on Accreditation reported that in 2015, 4.1% of universities offered fully online Bachelors of social work programs, 17.6% of universities offered fully online Masters of social work programs, and 12.5% of universities offered full online Doctoral of social work or PH.D degrees (CSWE, 2016). The Council on Social Work Education Commission on Accreditation reported that in 2015, 32% of universities offered part time online Bachelors of social work programs, 42.9% of universities offered part time online Masters of social work programs, and 50.5% of universities offered partial Doctoral of social work or Ph.D. programs (CSWE, 2016).

Many universities have noted that if they did not have a full time or part online social work education programs, there is one currently in development for either one or all of Bachelors Masters, Doctoral, or Ph.D. programs (CSWE, 2016).. Offering new education opportunities online for students is one way that today's universities are showing leadership in meeting society's mounting social issues. In 2010, it was reported that 19 million students were currently in online educational programs working towards degrees (Cross, 2013). The Council on Social Work Education Commission, much like the National Association of Social Workers, is in a

leadership role developing the core principles to direct this relatively new educational methodology. The current leaders in the field of social work education today are looking to the expansion of online educational programs to meet the demands of society for more social workers.

Online Education Efficacy

As social work higher education institutions continue to explore new innovations to meet the growing demands of the world's social issues, leaders in the field look to new research showing that there is a substantial upsurge specifically in new enrollment in online social work higher education programs (Kurzman, 2013). Should social work, a field primarily dealing with human interaction, be taught in an online setting though? It's true that online social work education programs are able to appeal to more consumers, allow for greater diversity, and offer educational prospects globally. In everyday life students of all programs including social work are dealing with family demands, professional interests, and personal stresses of a positive and negative nature, online higher education programs are becoming a premier choice to obtain social work degrees (Kurzman, 2013). But the need for online social work programs does not necessarily endorse its efficacy.

Studies have shown that online social work education learning platforms make education, specifically in the clinical social work, more cost efficient and open to a wider array of potential students, while still maintaining its' educational integrity (Ouellette & Westhuis, 2008).

Organizations such as the National Association of Social Work and the Council on Social Work Education have become important leaders in the field of social work education intensely monitoring and ensuring the worth and validity of online education programs. The CSWE

Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards ground online education social work programs in rudimentary essential proficiencies in an effort to maintain the upmost clinical veracity of these programs (CWSE EPAS, 2016).

What are the ethical implications involved in online social work education? Reamer notes that, “Online teaching environments amplify the ethical issues faced by instructors and students” (2013, p. 372). The first notable ethical issue is the limitations that some students have to accessing and learning in an online environment (Reamer, 2013). While online education is open to all students no matter what their geographical location, it may, by virtue of its delivery modality, exclude certain people who lack availability to internet services or who suffer from learning deficits that restrict their ability to learn online. Another ethical issue worth noting involves the cost of online social work education programs. The high cost of these programs are prohibitive to some individuals to access unless they can successfully navigate the financial aid systems that may be available to them (Reamer, 2013). Other ethical concerns include how programs gauge student interpersonal skills, monitor instructor competency, and ensure curriculum effectiveness (Reamer, 2013). The evolving field of online social work education strives to develop and implement systems to ensure the ethical standards of their programs.

Currently, online social work higher education programs are emerging as a more premiere choice as the curriculums have improved at meeting student needs while ensuring high quality education experiences. A recent study of graduating Masters of social work students compared and contrasted online graduates and onsite graduates resulting in no considerable discrepancy in the grade point averages or competency area ratings in 10 EPAS core areas (Cummings & Chaffin, 2012). Online social work education programs today successfully manage to integrate cross-cultural diversity and global perspectives into the curriculum. Current

studies into the phenomena further illustrate how online students of these social work programs on average score even higher than their onsite counterparts in focused competency points (Wiest, 2015).

Is there any difference between what online students of social work learn in their programs in comparison to onsite social work students? In a very recent longitudinal study of Masters level social work students, researchers found no significant variance in the learning outcomes between online educational programs and the traditional onsite education programs (Brown & Park, 2016). A literature review done comprehensively of a recent studies comparing online social work education programs to their onsite social work education program counterparts found that there was no significant variance in value of learning (Forgey & Ortega-Williams, 2016). The evidence is pointing towards the validity of the online platform for social work education. Another recent study surveyed how online clinical social work education programs adhere to a high level of clinical integrity and found that online education appear to be a valid educational platform to utilize in developing new social workers to meet the growing problems of this world (Jones, 2015).

Leaders in the field indicate that if online social work programs are going to be utilized more frequently then it is integral that these programs create a high quality and clinically significant educational experience for their students to learn within. There is a current debate in the field on whether or not social work, in which human interaction is so key, should be taught entirely using an online platform (Maidment, 2005). While there appears to be an emerging collection of research evidence suggesting the validity of online social work education, one research study argues this evidence is not totally decisive (Blackmon, 2013). Although ethically,

the evidence appears to be sound to use the online platform to instruct new social workers in their craft.

Retention Crisis

Leaders in the field of social work education are studying retention and contend that there is a crisis in online social work education. It has been noted that online higher education programs has significantly lower graduation rate than traditional onsite programs (Russo-Gleicher, 2014). There are no specifics regarding why this is the case. Another recent research study revealed that the retention rates for online higher education programs were 10-15% lower than those for traditional onsite classroom programs (Cochran, Campbell, Baker, & Leeds, 2014, p. 27). Other studies place this difference between 10-20% (Cross, 2013). This is a significant statistical difference.

Online social work students tend to drop out of their educational programs before graduation more than onsite social work students. A recent review of online Bachelors level social work programs found that online students were far less likely to successfully graduate from their educational program than were their onsite counterparts (McAllister, 2013). These studies draw out a serious issue of poor student retention through graduation in online social work education programs. Cross notes, “the problem of student retention in higher education in general, and in online education in particular, is becoming more and more recognized and is fast becoming an area in need of remedy” (2013, p. 8). Leaders in the field are working on studying just how to deal with this issue.

Retention Strategies

How can leaders in the field of social work education work within the confines of the online educational platform to retain online students through to graduation while maintain the integrity of the clinical programs? This topic has been explored in the literature and some interesting patterns have arisen. Some leaders in the field have looked at current retention strategies concerning preparation for program success, technological savviness, and environmental factors. After exploring the impact of each of these factors, they have determined that universities need to look at internal factors of online students to determine the keys to success (Cross, 2013).

In a qualitative study of online instructors the idea was explored of identifying which characteristics were most important for an online student to possess to persist through to graduation. The instructors pinpointed three separate factors as being necessary for an online student to be successful through graduation. The first characteristic identified as important was the student's ability to learn the designated subject matter (Russo-Gleicher, 2014). How well did they assimilate knowledge? The second characteristic discussed was the student's capacity to navigate the technology of the online learning platform well (Russo-Gleicher, 2014). How practically could the online student operate within the technological environment? The final characteristic agreed upon as important was the student's emotional hardiness (Russo-Gleicher, 2014). How well did the online student manage the rigors of educational experience in relation to their own life stressors?

The first two characteristics identified, subject material assimilation and online technology navigation are often referred to as competency characteristics. The third factor of emotional hardiness is considered a confidence characteristic. While leaders in the field agree

that all three characteristics are important for success in an online program, the first two are often better handled through straightforward tutoring and mentoring programs and modules (Russo-Gleicher, 2014). These competency issues tend to be easily remedied through coaching exercises and online learning experiential modules. Emotional hardiness appears necessary for students to graduate in an online higher education program, but it has not been closely studied (Russo-Gleicher, 2014).

Another project recently explored retention in graduate level courses specifically. It revealed that online graduate students indicate that the factors most important to program completion all fall within the relationship dimension (Cross, 2013). They cited personal support networks, connection to peers, and faculty care as key to success in completing graduate level online education programs (Cross, 2013). These three resources of potential support helps online students cope with educational stress.

A new research project did recently explore the impact of how online students cope with educational stressors. It determined that how well an online student deals with the anxiety of the educational experience impacts significantly how they will actually learn and retain from the course material (Rapp & Anyikwa, 2016). How an online social work student manages their reaction to educational stressors seems to be important towards improving their academic performance and program retention.

Educational Stressors

Leaders in the social work education field agree that online curriculums with their intense schedules, multiple assignments, regular deadlines, and interactive discussion boards are stressful on students (Russo-Gleicher, 2014). Secondary stressors also exist when one considers

juggling school with personal and familial commitments. Research is showing that online students are more likely to be older than their traditional counterparts with active life responsibilities (Cross, 2013). Anxieties surrounding the financial investments, time investments, and questioning one's abilities to be successful in the online educational program also contribute to the stresses. All of these factors together add up to an intensely stressful experience.

Some online students appear to weather these anxieties with some mentoring and counseling by program faculty members and advisors, while other online students seem to be unable to overcome these obstacles no matter how much help they receive (Russo-Gleicher, 2014). Is the aforementioned emotional hardiness the key to online student retention? Leaders in the social work education field have noted that many online students demonstrate a form of emotional resiliency that helps them to persist until they are successful in graduating an online educational program, while other online students flounder in the online program and eventually dropout. It is an emerging idea that developing the ability to cope with the stressors of an online educational program directly impacts on the student's academic performance and educational experience (Forgey & Ortega-Williams, 2016). This emotional resiliency therefore seems to have a substantial effect upon online student retention.

What factors can increase the feeling of emotional resiliency in online social work students? A recent study by emerging leaders in the field showed that when online social work students identify feeling a strong sense of connection and belonging to fellow students and instructors in the online modality it impacts retention (Noble & Russell, 2013). Reportedly feeling a sense of fitting and connectedness aids online students in managing educational stressors of their programs leading to higher retention rates (Noble & Russell, 2013).

Another recent study found similar results when studying students in online higher education programs. This project charted which characteristics the online students felt were most critical to benefit their continued progress in the education program through successful graduation. The study found that successful online students believed a strong sense of belonging in a specific program was a critically important to their retention. These online students expressed that beyond any competency strategies, education programs that nurtured a sense of connection led to less experienced anxiety and higher retention rates (Thomas, Herbert, & Teras, 2014). Again it appears that helping an online student cope with educational stressors through some means such as increasing connection to peers and faculty leads to higher retention.

New Paths

What new innovations are the leaders in the social work education field exploring to address the issue of student retention in online educational programs? There are some interesting recent explorations into new areas. One new avenue being examined recently in the relatively similar field of nursing is using “Caring Groups” to bolster and strengthen online students in their educational programs (Brown & Wilson, 2016, p. 402). The idea is to help these students develop and practice healthy self-care plans managing the stress and anxiety of their online education programs (Brown & Wilson, 2016, p. 402).

It has been determined that creating a caring environment with a group of online students help them share experiences, challenge one another, and improve program success leading to higher retention rates (Brown & Wilson, 2016, p. 402). Again sense of belonging appears key to teaching healthy stress management. New research is showing that engagement of the online student in the online community is strong method to increase program success and raise retention

rates (Cross, 2013). These online students are more invested in the educational program citing a stronger sense of belonging and higher program satisfaction (Cross, 2013).

A recent study examining students in online education programs revealed that feeling a sense of belonging to a program was a defining characteristic of higher retention (Thomas, Herbert, & Teras, 2014). Universities that nurtured a strong sense of belonging in the students of their online programs, found that faculty reported about their students, “they feel like there’s more online sense of community, we’re finding less anxiety, we’re finding more retention, less attrition.” (Thomas, Herbert, & Teras, 2014). Sense of belonging is a powerful motivator for persistence.

The idea of persistence in online students of education programs has been a focus of recent studies. Persistence is considered the trait in some online students to push on in educational programs despite obstacles and issues (Lehman, et al, 2014). A recent quantitative quasi-experimental research study of online students found that persistence was an important trait for online students to possess (Franko, 2015). Having persistence means the difference between dropping out when educational stressors mount or continuing to push forward towards success. Persistence is often measured by the number of classes the online student actually completed successfully. This is also referred to as longevity in the educational program (Cross, 2013). Leaders in the field stress the importance of student persistence in increasing retention through graduation in online programs.

Some leaders are taking the concept of persistence a step further and exploring the concept of grit. Rooted in conscientiousness, grit combines persistence with passion for a long term goal (Duckworth, 2016). While an online social work student may show persistence in overcoming situational obstacles and setbacks of their educational program ultimately passing

each class and graduating, it is their passion to be a social worker that drives them on. Therefore grit is a drive for a long term goal that plays out as tenacity in the short term experiences (Cross, 2013). This correlates significantly to social work, as often students will express a calling to become a social worker that drives them to overcome and strive towards that long term goal despite the odds. Many Christian social work students report their motivation to become social worker derives from a Christian calling (Laine-Scales & Kelly, 2016). How much this impacts the characteristic of grit is a undeveloped research area.

Leaders in the online education field are exploring how positive psychology can be utilized to impact on student retention rates. Positive psychology is the study of how to live life well. It focuses on building a better life rather than labelling and concentrating on the negative aspects. It centers on the idea that positive character traits can be learned and strengthened given time and effort. Given this theoretical framework characteristics such as persistence and grit can be taught to online students helping them be successful in their programs (Cross, 2013).

Adding to this concept of developing persistence or grit in online social work students, is new thinking by leaders of the social work education field into using of Trauma-Informed Care principles to help student develop healthy self-care habits. Trauma Informed Care (TIC) is utilizing widely currently due to the universal experience of everyone experiencing some type of trauma. TIC has been successfully applied to individuals, groups, families, and organizations to alleviate suffering from symptoms of trauma (Bowen & Murshid, 2016). Trauma can be defined not only as physical or sexual abuse, but it can also be emotional abuse and neglect by anyone in one's life including families, friends, peers, bosses, colleagues, and strangers (Bowen & Murshid, 2016). Trauma can involve growing in a family, neighborhood, or larger area impacted by poverty, natural disaster, mental illness, emotional disorder, political upheaval, cultural clash,

or economic crisis (Bowen & Murshid, 2016). This tends to expand one's definition of trauma and include almost everyone as having experienced some degree of it. Trauma covers a great variety of negative life experiences one might not have previously considered.

The difference between two different online students regarding level of persistence may involve prior experiences with trauma, so leaders in the social work education field are beginning to consider it an important issues with regards to student retention. TIC is conceptualized as an, "organizational change process centered on principles intended to promote healing and reduce the risk of retraumatization for vulnerable individuals" which necessitates change at a macro-level in an organization to embrace its utilization (Bowen & Murshid, 2016, p. 223). A recent leader has hypothesized using a web-based psychoeducational course to show online students what trauma is, its causes, and how to mitigate its impact (Kropp, 2015). It may have a secondary benefit though, of improving stress management techniques of online students resulting in better persistence (Kropp, 2015). This online course may be constructed as a teaching module to teach online social work students how to cope with the anxieties of their online higher education programs. This would increase the online student's persistence leading to greater retention, and reinforcing the importance for ongoing self-care practices to them.

Applicable Theories

Mindfulness is an important leadership theory to consider. Utilizing the leadership theory of mindfulness with online students can assist them in developing the discipline of raising their awareness of the self in the moment experienced without judgment (Brendel & Bennett, 2016). Mindfulness leadership by an instructor endorses to the online social work student how one can manage stress of the educational program by embracing a larger life world perspective and

challenging how one perceives the world in general (Brendel & Bennett, 2016). Mindfulness is key to good self-care principles and correlates highly with Positive Psychology and is a necessary practice for online instructors to role model for their students. This leads into a Behavioral leadership approach.

Behavioral leadership theory is an important theory to follow. It focuses on the actions of a leader being positive role modeling. The emphasis of Behavioral leadership style is on how the leader uses tasks such as work on assignments or discussion boards in the case of online social work education, to move followers into a collaborative relationship (Northouse, 2016). This is key to creating that environment where online students feel a strong sense of belonging which increases active management of the stressors of the educational program. This is a critical concept to improve the retention of online social work students.

Early online learning systems were based on a theoretical Behaviorist approach concentrating on observable learning. The Behaviorist approach has been more recently abandoned for a Cognitive Behavioral and Constructivist approach to learning in an online platform (Anderson, 2008). The Cognitive Behavioral theory centers on learning that incorporates a synthesis of memory, motivation, and thinking (Anderson, 2008). This theory is key to online student retention, as motivation is critical to both persistence and grit.

Constructivist theory is also key to exploring how to improve online student retention. Constructivist theorists believe that online students experience the course according to their perception of it. So how students perceive the experience sets the tone for learning it, interacting with peers, working with faculty, and performing academically (Anderson, 2008). If an online educational experience is constructed to invite the student to personalize the course material through a lens of their own personal reality then learning becomes meaningful

(Anderson, 2008). Meaningful learning connects to higher sense of belonging, greater student persistence, and better retention in the program. The key may lie within making the classroom personal to online students.

These three theories form a taxonomy for online learning. Behaviorist theory impresses the importance of what material is taught in the online environment (Ertmer & Newby, 1993). Cognitive Behavior theory focuses on how the material is taught in the online environment (Ertmer & Newby, 1993). Constructivist theory centers on why the student cares about the material taught in the online environment (Ertmer & Newby, 1993). This taxonomy of learning corresponds with the use of the Ecological theory to understand the student experience in the online educational program.

The Ecological perspective theory applies to the issue of improving online social work student retention rates. The Ecological theory postulates that a person and their environment are immersed in a system of transactions following a systemic structure of behaviors, communication, and boundaries (Coady & Lehmann, 2008). An online course obviously has a very structured pathway to share information through readings, discussion boards, chat rooms, emails, and phone calls. Each of these paths allows for a healthy flow of information between multiple sources. There is a transactional relationship built into the online classroom that models the principles of Ecological theory (Coady & Lehmann, 2008). Each student shapes the online environment and is, in turn, shaped by the environment. The online social work student impacts the online learning experience as the online learning experience impacts them.

The Ecological Theory postulates that the goodness to fit between a person and their environment determines their experience of it (Coady & Lehmann, 2008). How a student experiences the online learning environment is their ecological niche. Are they active or passive?

Are they challenging to others or supportive? Are they comfortable with the experience or do they struggle with it? A student's ecological niche depends significantly on the tension between the two dimensions of demands and resources (Coady & Lehmann, 2008). Does a student's available resources in the online experience meet the demands the educational program places on them? If so then they tend to experience the course as positive and they cope with its stressors. If the social work student does not know how to access the resources available to them or is not motivated to do so, then the substantial demands of the online educational program will leave them feeling defeated.

Online educational programs will always have a high degree of demand set to maintain course validity. This is in addition to the outside stressors that go along with online educational programs such as family expectations, job duties, and personal responsibilities. If an online student falters under the weight of all this, there is only realistically so much an online instructor can do to lower demands in way of allowing for late work or assignment grace without destroying the integrity of the program and short changing the student as well. Therefore the focus must be on the other end of the spectrum, notably improving the online social work student's ability and willingness to utilize their resources.

Research is now showing that retention strategies focusing on altering or simplifying the online learning platform to improve student retention have not been effective (Cochran, Campbell, Baker, & Leeds, 2014). Developing and refining resources for online students without engaging them effectively to use those resources has been demonstrated to make no impact on online student retention. Online educational programs are now studying the individual traits of online students trying to understand how to empower students (Cochran, Campbell, Baker, & Leeds, 2014).

Conclusion

This project's specialization is online social work education. Specifically the literature is leading the project towards a synthesis of material on emotional hardiness, persistence, and grit through a lens of Mindfulness leadership theory, a taxonomy of learning, and the Ecological perspective. The leaders in this field have determined that poor retention in online educational programs is a problem that needs to be addressed. This is particularly significant for social work where online educational programs are necessary to meet the demand for new social workers stemming from growing social issues. It has also been recognized by leaders in the field that it is critical the online social work program to teach good stress management skills to their students to ensure greater student retention, better academic performance, and higher levels of program satisfaction (Rapp & Anyikwa, 2016).

There is a gap in the current leadership in the field on how to distill all the research down into a workable system to assist online social work student's deal with the stressors of their online educational programs in order to achieve successful program graduation and enter the workforce. Therefore leadership plan will utilize leadership practices including research, education, and policy development to synthesize and create a system for teaching and encouraging grit that highlights the development of high levels of persistence, motivation, and passion resulting in higher retention rates in online social work students through graduation and beyond.

A process of evaluating this system will also need to be explored and developed. Ultimately, the same attributes required to graduate a stressful online program, is what these new social worker will need to succeed in this difficult field and impact today's world in positive

ways. A new avenue of research may be the impact of Christian calling on the concept of Grit as well.

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