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Social Work and the Environment

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Introduction

The purpose of this study is to explore how social work students, faculty, and staff understand environmental justice and their perceived level of environmental engagement in their respective programs. It is an exploratory study that employed purposive, convenience sampling to select individuals with different roles within their social work programs. The basic research guiding this study is, “How do participants perceive their environmental education or engagement within their social work program?”

Methods

- Participants were recruited from two schools, the University of Southern Maine (USM) and the University of New England (UNE).
- The recruitment process was differed between the two schools.
  - The researcher is a student at USM, and used her own role as a USM graduate student to reach out to prospective participants.
  - For UNE recruitment, the researcher relied on word of mouth and informants.
- Interviews were transcribed and then coded for emergent themes.
  - All data was manually coded by the researcher.

Results

Participants perceived their environmental education or engagement within their social work program as being central, somewhat present, or not at all, with a number of important factors influencing their responses.

- Consternation: The majority of participants hesitated, expressed confusion or even some anxiety, when responding to the question, “Do you know about the NASW’s stance on environmental justice?”
  - Many expressed awareness of some environmental stance but did not name any specifics.
- Interest: In contrast, the majority of participants also expressed interest in learning more about the ways in which social workers can connect environmental issues with their practice.

Next Steps

The findings in this research project have many things in common with published studies looking at social worker’s understanding of environmental issues.

- For example, Miller & Hayward (2014) found in their research that the majority of students said environmental issues are important (72%) and sixty-three percent reported that environmental issues should be included in social work curriculum only eight percent said there was “enough” content related to environmental issues in the social work curriculum (p. 287).

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References
