Comparison of Faculty Ratings of Applicants and Background Characteristics as Predictors of Performance in an MSW Program

Anne E. Fortune

ABSTRACT. Admissions decisions are critical in gate-keeping for social work because so few students are screened out after admissions. Faculty often evaluate MSW applicants to assess the intangible personal qualities that make a good social worker. Are faculty admissions ratings better predictors of performance in graduate school than background characteristics such as undergraduate major, undergraduate GPA and experience? A study of 106 graduates of one MSW program found that background characteristics were better predictors of performance than the faculty’s overall applicant rating. Performance indicators were academic grades and field instructors’ ratings of practice skills at the end of generalist and advanced field placements. [Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <getinfo@haworthpress.com> Website: <http://www.HaworthPress.com> © 2003 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]

KEYWORDS. Gate-keeping, admissions, academic performance, field performance, social work education

Anne E. Fortune, PhD, AM, ACSW, is Professor at the School of Social Welfare, University at Albany, State University of New York, 135 Western Avenue, Albany, NY 12222 (E-mail: rfortune@albany.edu).

The author thanks Mary McCarthy, Elizabeth Tenney Kelsey, Laura Jamieson, and Lori Kinch-Ashley for their assistance.
Decisions about admission to a social work program are important in maintaining professional standards. Because so few students are excluded later in the educational process, screening at admissions is the primary means to ensure that competent, ethical social work practitioners enter the profession (Hepler & Noble, 1990). Most social work programs have elaborate admissions criteria based on beliefs about the personal qualities that are essential for a social worker, for example, interpersonal skills, maturity, and motivation (Miller & Koerin, 1998). Many programs rely on faculty evaluation of these qualities to admit students. Yet there is little evidence about the usefulness of such screening mechanisms or whether more objective measures such as previous academic performance are adequate admissions criteria. How well do faculty assessments of applicant quality predict graduate school performance? This study examines whether faculty ratings add anything beyond knowing background characteristics when trying to predict graduate performance.

SCREENING STUDENTS FOR GRADUATE SCHOOL

**Faculty Admissions Ratings**

Admissions decisions are important to the social work profession because they are the first and perhaps most important mechanism to ensure quality control of future practitioners (GlenMaye & Oakes, 2002; Moore & Urwin, 1990). In addition to academic criteria, most graduate programs have indicators of suitability and unsuitability for the profession (Miller & Koerin, 1998). These indicators include personal qualities such as maturity, interpersonal style, self-awareness and ethics; motivational qualities such as commitment to the mission of social work and concern for people; and absence of undesirable behaviors such as criminal activity or substance abuse. To aid in assessing such personal qualities, programs ask applicants to submit personal statements, reference letters, work histories, and other material (Miller & Koerin, 1998). Typically, faculty members evaluate some aspect of the materials such as quality of the work experience, quality of references, overall potential or suitability for the profession, etc. In a listserv survey of social work admissions professionals that we conducted in June 2001, representatives of 43 MSW programs responded (of 147 accredited programs). Forty included faculty ratings of applicants either directly in making the admissions decision or as advisory to a
decision-maker. Two asked faculty to evaluate marginal applicants, and only one did not involve faculty at all in the decision-making process.

Yet despite consensus on the general criteria and processes for evaluating applicants, evaluations usually include large elements of subjectivity. How accurate and useful are such faculty admissions ratings?

Several studies reliability of faculty admissions ratings may be difficult to achieve. Faculty members often have difficulty agreeing on how to rate applications. In two studies reported together, agreement between pairs of raters ranged from $r = -0.62$ to $+0.87$ with an overall reliability coefficient of $0.22$, “well removed from any acceptable criteria for interjudge reliability” (Dailey, 1979, 17). In addition, some faculty members were much better than others at predicting future performance. In a third study, intraclass correlations between pairs of raters ranged from $0.36$ to $0.50$ (GlenMaye & Oakes, 2002). In only one study was agreement high, with an interrater reliability of above $0.9$ where $1.0$ indicates perfect agreement among raters (Maslany & Wiegand, 1974). In this study, the rating points were clearly defined, the raters interviewed each candidate together, and the raters discussed their ratings after making them, which should increase their consensus on the next applicant.

Studies of how well faculty admissions ratings predict students’ performances in school show mixed results. Ratings of quality of specific aspects of an application such as the personal statement (Duder & Aronson, 1978; GlenMaye & Oakes, 2002), work experience (Bogo & Davin, 1989), or suitability (Bogo & Davin, 1989) show little association with later performance. On the other hand, more global ratings of overall potential or admissibility appear to be somewhat better predictors. Overall or summary ratings were associated with course grades or academic GPA (Dailey, 1979; Duder & Aronson, 1978), with grades or skill ratings in field (Pfouts & Henley, 1977), and with faculty ratings of professional potential at graduation (Dunlap, 1979). In most studies, however, there was some mix of results. For example, in one study, overall rating was associated with one of three course grades (Duder & Aronson, 1978). In a second study, overall rating was associated with GPA but not field skill ratings (Dailey, 1979). And in most studies, the predictive power was not great, usually explaining less than 10% of the variability in performance (correlations around 0.30).

Overall, previous studies indicate that faculty admissions ratings tend to be unreliable and probably idiosyncratic unless there is adequate specification and consensus-building. Nevertheless, averaged global ratings of candidates’ potential, intended to capture personal qualities
and overall gestalt of an applicant, can predict performance, although with margin for error.

**Other Admissions Criteria**

Although admissions decisions are often based on faculty ratings, academic or background characteristics can predict student performance directly. Potential predictors that have been investigated in social work include age, experience, sex, undergraduate grade point average (GPA), undergraduate degree, and quality of the undergraduate school.

Life or work experience may be considered a prerequisite for understanding one’s self and helping others (Lyman, Storm & York, 1995). Human service experience also indicates that the applicant has tested a vocation and made a commitment to social work. Both age (as a proxy for life experience) and human service experience have mixed results as predictors of performance in social work or related programs. In three studies, age was not related to academic and field performance (Duder & Aronson, 1978; Dunlap, Henley & Fraser, 1998; Koroloff & Rhyne, 1989). In another three studies, *younger* students did better: they had higher scores on examinations (Daehnert & Carter, 1987), better ratings of field skills (Cunningham, 1982), and greater improvement in clinical skills over time (Anderson, 1992).

For human service experience, results were mixed. Greater experience was not related to academic performance (Dunlap et al., 1998; Sterne, Perry, Schultz, Ernst & Halsor, 1979) or post-graduate achievement (Specht, Britt & Frost, 1987). Experience did seem to be related to field performance (Koroloff & Rhyne, 1989; Pflous & Henley, 1977). However, clients rated the outcome of their therapy better if the students had less life experience (Lyman et al., 1995).

Previous academic experiences such as GPA, quality of undergraduate school, and major are usually predictors of graduate performance. In nearly every study, undergraduate GPA was correlated with academic performance (grades, graduate GPA or examination scores) (Bogo & Davin, 1989; Duder & Aronson, 1978; Dunlap et al., 1998; Dunlap, 1979; Fortune, Green & Kolevzon, 1987; Sterne et al., 1979). Undergraduate GPA was also correlated with field performance in some studies (Cunningham, 1982; Duder & Aronson, 1978). Quality of the undergraduate college attended was related to ratings of professional skills in two of three studies (Daehnert & Carter, 1987; Dunlap et al.,
1998; Pfouts & Henley, 1977). Several studies reported that having a bachelor’s degree in social work (BSW) rather than another major was associated with poorer academic performance and lower achievement (Dunlap et al., 1998; Fortune et al., 1987; Specht, Britt & Frost, 1984; Specht et al., 1987). In three other studies, BSW degree holders did as well as other students (Carrillo & Thyer, 1994; Knight, 1993; Thyer, Vonk & Tandy, 1996). However, those three programs required higher GPAs of advanced standing applicants than of other applicants.

While not criteria for admission, sex and race may affect a candidate’s admission and performance. Sex was either not relevant to performance (Duder & Aronson, 1978; Fortune et al., 1987; Specht et al., 1987; Sterne et al., 1979), or women did better, usually on ratings of field (Anderson, 1992; Dunlap et al., 1998; Pfouts & Henley, 1977). Race, too, had mixed results, with two studies reporting differences (Dunlap et al., 1998; Dunlap, 1979) and three studies reporting no differences (Fortune et al., 1987; Knight, 1993; Specht et al., 1987).

In sum, previous academic performance and quality of undergraduate school are clearly related to better performance in graduate school. Other indicators are mixed, with a possible edge in performance for younger students and those with non-social work degrees.

**RESEARCH QUESTION**

If performance can be predicted by background characteristics, what is added by having faculty rate applicants? Many schools of social work use faculty ratings of application material to assess the personal qualities necessary for social work, the hard-to-measure characteristics such as maturity, commitment, and suitability that are not reflected in indicators like undergraduate grade point average. Do faculty ratings indeed capture intangible characteristics that enhance performance as a social worker? That is, do they add predictive power beyond knowing background characteristics? Or are faculty ratings influenced by the same characteristics that predict performance? This study examines whether faculty admissions ratings at one graduate social work program are better than background characteristics at predicting performance. Indicators of performance in graduate school included academic grades and field instructors’ ratings of student performance in generalist and advanced field placements.
RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Sampling and Procedure

The sample included all 106 students who specialized in direct practice (clinical social work) and graduated in a recent year with their Master’s of Social Work from one northeastern school of social work. The graduates’ files were reviewed for information about the students’ background, the faculty’s overall rating of the applicant at admissions, and the students’ actual performance in social work classes and field. The University’s Institutional Review Board for protection of human subjects approved the research procedures.

Measurement

Admissions Evaluation

The admissions evaluations were based on the written material submitted by each applicant: transcripts of previous academic work, letters of reference, resumé, and personal statement of goals. To improve reliability, the Admissions Committee discussed ratings and criteria and rated sample folders. Then, two members of the Admissions Committee gave each applicant an “overall applicant rating” on a scale from 5 = excellent to 1 = poor. Interrater reliability was not good. The correlation between the two raters was .216 (p = .07). Only 28% of raters gave the same rating, for example, both 5s or both 3s. However, 88% were within one step of each other, for example, 3 and 4. In the admissions process, if the ratings were two or more steps apart, a third member of the Admissions Committee also rated the applicant. In this study, we used the average of all raters for each applicant.

At the time of the study, the Dean made final admissions decisions using Admissions Committee ratings as guidelines but also considering the needs of the program. Because the admissions decisions included factors other than faculty rating, the range of faculty ratings among admitted students was greater than if the ratings were the sole criteria for admissions (see Table 1). In research like this that studies students admitted to a program, a statistical problem is restriction of range. That is, because only those with the highest scores are included in the sample, the variability among them is smaller than in the population (Dunlap et al., 1998; Glisson & Hudson, 1981; Huitema & Stein, 1993). In this
study, restricted range is less of a problem than usual because of the program’s admissions policies.

Students’ Background Characteristics

Background characteristics that were known to the admissions raters and might reasonably be expected to predict performance in the MSW program were included in the study. These included age, years of human service experience, sex, race, undergraduate major, undergraduate GPA, quality of undergraduate college, and whether the student had taken courses as a nondegree student. Undergraduate GPA was measured on a 4 point scale with 4.00 = A. The quality of the undergraduate college was measured using the college’s ranking in the *US News and World Report* rankings of undergraduate colleges. A college was coded as “top 25” if it was listed in either the top 25 overall or the top 25 liberal arts colleges. Nondegree coursework was included because it was noted on the admissions rating form if the student had already taken graduate social work courses, and this might have influenced Admissions Committee members.

Graduate Performance

Measures of student performance in graduate school included field instructors’ ratings of their performance in each of the two field placements and student grades in academic classes.

The students’ performance in each placement was measured by the Direct Practice Evaluation Instrument (McCarthy & Abramson, 1992), a skill-specific form completed by the field instructor at three points during the academic year. Skills were grouped in six areas: Student as Learner; Development of Professional Attitudes, Values and Ethics; Knowledge and Skills for Agency-Based Work; Communication Skills; Assessment Skills; and Intervention Skills. The instrument for the second placement included additional skills and more advanced skills. Each skill was rated on a scale from 1 (unacceptable) to 5 (outstanding). Field instructors were trained to evaluate students on the Direct Practice Evaluation Instrument during a required seminar. In this study, we used only the final, end-of-placement, evaluation. The final evaluation included 112 skills for the first placement and 123 skills for the second placement. For each placement, all skills were averaged (after omitting skills that were not applicable in that agency). Internal consis-
tency of the Direct Practice Evaluation Instrument was excellent, with Chronbach’s alpha of .98 on each instrument.

Grade point average (GPA) was the average of graded academic courses taken at the university. Grades were assigned values on a 4-point scale (A = 4.0, A− = 3.7, B+ = 3.3, etc.). The first-year GPA included courses in the generalist curriculum required of all students. Students took these courses before or concurrent with the first placement. Second-year GPA included Direct Practice courses, which students selected from among numerous options. Field placements, which were graded on a Satisfactory- Unsatisfactory basis, were not included in GPA.

THE SAMPLE

The students were predominantly female (79%) and Caucasian (89%) (see Table 1). Age ranged from 24 years to 71 years, with a mean of 34.5 years but 40% under 30 years. A majority (57%) had human service experience before entering the MSW program (mean = 3.3 years). Their undergraduate majors were in social work (26%), psychology (23%), sociology (17%), other social sciences (13%), and the arts (21%). Their overall applicant ratings from members of the Admissions Committee were suitably high, averaging 3.85 on the 5-point scale (range 2 to 5, sd = .63).

Students’ performances were generally good. The mean field evaluation on the Direct Practice Evaluation Instrument was 4.21 for the first field placement, 4.38 for the second placement. Grades in academic classes were good, averaging 3.56 for generalist first year courses, and 3.62 for second year Direct Practice courses.

RESULTS

Plan of Analysis

To test the relative importance of background characteristics and admissions ratings, four sets of hierarchical OLS multiple regression equations were conducted, one for each performance measure. In each set, we entered first the background characteristics as a block: years of human service experience, sex, race, undergraduate major, undergraduate GPA, college rank, and nondegree coursework. Because age and
years of experience were highly correlated ($r = .63$), we used only experience in the regressions. In a second block, we entered the faculty admissions rating (Model 2). If the raters were assessing personal qualities that were related to performance in the social work program, the admissions rating should increase the variance explained significantly.

For dichotomous variables, we used dummy variables coded 1 and 0 (e.g., male = 1, female = 0). For college major, we created two dummy variables, social work and sociology. Having a social work degree was the same as attending the advanced standing program (because that degree was a prerequisite for advanced standing). Sociology was included

### TABLE 1. Characteristics of Students (n = 106)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Means:</th>
<th>Mean</th>
<th>Standard Deviation</th>
<th>No. of Valid Responses</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Performance</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First Field Placement Skill Rating</td>
<td>4.21</td>
<td>.61</td>
<td>95</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>First-Year GPA</td>
<td>3.56</td>
<td>.25</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second Field Placement Skill Rating</td>
<td>4.38</td>
<td>.51</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Second-Year GPA</td>
<td>3.62</td>
<td>.23</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Background Characteristics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age in years</td>
<td>34.48</td>
<td>9.06</td>
<td>104</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years experience</td>
<td>3.32</td>
<td>5.20</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate GPA</td>
<td>3.21</td>
<td>.43</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Admissions Evaluation</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Overall applicant rating (5 = outstanding)</td>
<td>3.85</td>
<td>.63</td>
<td>82</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Frequency counts:</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Background Characteristics</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex: Male</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>84</td>
<td>79</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race: Black or Hispanic</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Caucasian</td>
<td>94</td>
<td>89</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate major:</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social work (advanced standing)</td>
<td>27</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>103</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Psychology</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>23</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociology</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>17</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other social science</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>13</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Arts</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>21</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College ranked in top 25 by <em>US News &amp; World Report</em></td>
<td>52</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Took courses as non-degree student</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>106</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
because in bivariate analyses; sociology majors were similar to social work majors but differed from all other majors.

For the background characteristics, if a value was missing, we substituted the average value. For continuous variables, we substituted the mean. For example, for human service experience, three students with no information in their folders were assigned the mean of 3.32 years. For categorical variables, we substituted the modal category, for example, “not social work” for social work major. (Table 1 includes the number of valid responses.) We did not substitute values for the faculty admissions rating nor for field and academic performance, so the sample sizes vary among regression equations.

**Performance Predictors**

Table 2 gives the correlations between predictor variables and field and academic performance. Tables 3-6 give the results of the regression equations for each performance indicator.

For performance in the first field placement, the background characteristics by themselves explained 25% of the variance in students’ skills (Table 3, Model 1, adjusted R²) (F = 4.22, df = 8,68, p = .00). The faculty admissions rating did not increase the explanation of performance (Model 2, R² change = .000, p = .90). Significant predictors were race (beta in the full equation = .235, t = 2.18, p < .04) and having a social work degree (beta = .425, t = 3.85, p = .00).

For academic achievement in the generalist first year courses, the background characteristics explained 20% of the variance in first year GPA (Table 4, Model 1) (F = 3.56, df = 8,71, p < .01). Again, the addition of faculty admissions rating (Model 2) did not significantly increase the variability explained (increase in R² = .007, p = .42). Significant predictors of first-year GPA were years of previous experience (beta = .278, t = 2.41, p < .02), having a social work degree (beta = -.290, t = -2.61, p < .02), and undergraduate grade point average (beta = .241, t = 2.12, p < .04).

For the second field placement, the equation did not explain a significant proportion of the variation in students’ ratings (Table 5) (for Model 2, adjusted R² = .017, F = 1.155, df = 9,70, p = .34). Neither background characteristics nor faculty admissions rating were a significant predictor of students’ performance in the second field placement.

For grade point average in the second-year Direct Practice courses, background characteristics accounted for 15% of the variance (Table 6,
Model 1) \( F = 2.730, \text{df} = 8,73, p < .02 \). Faculty admissions rating did not add to the variance explained (change in \( R^2 = .000, p = .96 \)). The only significant predictor was majoring in social work (\( \beta = -.356, t = -3.16, p < .01 \)).

In sum, except for the second year field, background characteristics did predict students’ performance in field and classes. Faculty overall applicant ratings did not increase the accuracy of those predictions.

**Predictors of Faculty Ratings**

If faculty admissions ratings of applicants do not improve prediction of applicants’ subsequent performances, are the faculty ratings influenced by background characteristics? To answer that question, we conducted another regression analysis, with faculty admissions rating as the dependent variable and background characteristics as independent
Indeed, background characteristics significantly predicted faculty admissions rating, explaining 20% of the variance (F = 3.454; df = 8, 73; p < .01). Two characteristics were significant: Higher ratings of the applicant were associated with longer human service experience (beta = .329, t = 3.02, p < .01) and with higher undergraduate grade point average (beta = .227, t = 2.04, p < .05).

**DISCUSSION**

In this study, background demographic and performance characteristics of MSW applicants, when taken together, were predictors of academic performance and of performance in the first but not second field placement. Background characteristics explained between 15% and 25% of the variance in performance indicators. The faculty overall applicant rating did not increase the amount explained. Whatever faculty might be rating, they were not capturing personal qualities that would
predict competence better than could objective measures of previous background and performance. In short, they were not adding to our ability to say who might perform better in a graduate social work program.

The poor ability of admissions ratings to predict who would do well in the MSW program could be due to several factors. First, like some previous studies (Dailey, 1979), we found poor reliability among raters. Despite training sessions to improve faculty consensus, faculty raters did not agree very well with each other. Perhaps some faculty members were more astute than others in assessing potential, but because of limitations in the data, we were not able to test this, as Dailey did. It may be possible to increase faculty reliability through additional training and monitoring. However, unless one knows who predicts future performance accurately (or which criteria are relevant), the effort to attain reliability may reinforce selection of inappropriate applicants.

Second, the admissions ratings were associated with the background characteristics we used as predictors. Two background characteristics were significant: undergraduate GPA and human service experience.
Apparently, faculty raters were influenced to give higher ratings to students with more experience and those with better GPAs. Thus, to some extent, they were rating past performance rather than the less tangible personal suitability for the profession. In addition, both undergraduate GPA and experience predicted first year academic performance, so the raters were duplicating some of the predictive capacity of the background characteristics.

Third, in making their judgments, the faculty raters had to rely on written material prepared by the applicant and his or her selected references. Possibly other sources of data, such as interviews of applicants, might lead to more reliable and accurate predictions of performance. The question for social work programs, particularly larger ones, is how much effort to expend to improve screening processes.

In terms of predicting performance, undergraduate major was the only characteristic that consistently predicted performance. Applicants without a BSW did better in the first field placement and in both generalist and advanced academic classes. The lower ratings for BSWs in the
first field placement could be because the advanced standing students completed a shortened generalist curriculum and were evaluated for the first field placement after three months, compared to eight months for non-BSW students. This does not, however, explain their lower academic performance. As in Hepler and Noble’s study (1990), these BSWs had higher average undergraduate GPAs (p < .05) and lower graduate GPAs (ps = .07 and .00) than did applicants with other degrees. It appears that, as Hepler and Noble (1990, 129) conclude, “BSW grades overstate student ability.” Further, faculty ratings were not associated with undergraduate degree, suggesting that faculty were over-rating students with BSW degrees.

For other background characteristics, experience and undergraduate GPA were associated with first-year generalist GPA but not with other performance indicators. This mix of results is consistent with previous research (Cunningham, 1982; Dunlap, 1979; Koroloff & Rhyne, 1989; Sterne et al., 1979). GPA may be a good predictor only for performance measures that are similar (Sternberg & Williams, 1997), that is, first-
year coursework is more like undergraduate coursework than field and advanced Direct Practice courses. Experience has not previously been related to academic performance, although it has sometimes been an asset in field (Dunlap et al., 1998; Sterne et al., 1979). African-Americans and Hispanics had lower first-year GPAs but did as well as others in field and second year courses. Other background characteristics were not associated with performance: sex, quality of undergraduate school, and taking courses as a nondegree student. Notable too is that admissions ratings did not vary by these characteristics, nor by race or major.

Should faculty ratings in admissions be abandoned, if they are unreliable and do not add information about potential performance? Faculty members in this study do not seem to be assessing intangible personal qualities that are linked to graduate school performance beyond what previous performance can predict. Why then should faculty spend the time and effort evaluating applicants’ dossiers? As an alternative to faculty ratings, some programs have developed formal and specific rating systems; for example, so many points for human service experience, so many for multi-cultural experiences. The criteria and weightings reflect carefully-considered and explicit values. While these rating systems may not be better at assessing suitability for the profession, they are explicit, consistent, and fairly reliable. A requirement for developing such a system is faculty consensus on the criteria, which may be difficult to attain.

One argument for retaining faculty admissions rating is that background and performance characteristics are by no means perfect predic-

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Background Characteristics</th>
<th>b</th>
<th>Beta</th>
<th>t</th>
<th>p</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>2.381</td>
<td>3.798</td>
<td>.000*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Years experience</td>
<td>.042</td>
<td>.329</td>
<td>3.020</td>
<td>.003*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sex</td>
<td>-.154</td>
<td>-.098</td>
<td>-.930</td>
<td>.355</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race</td>
<td>-.261</td>
<td>-.142</td>
<td>-1.337</td>
<td>.185</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sociology major</td>
<td>.145</td>
<td>.085</td>
<td>.763</td>
<td>.448</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social work major</td>
<td>.243</td>
<td>.181</td>
<td>1.656</td>
<td>.102</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Undergraduate GPA</td>
<td>.362</td>
<td>.227</td>
<td>2.044</td>
<td>.045*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>College rank (1 = in top 25)</td>
<td>.230</td>
<td>.184</td>
<td>1.693</td>
<td>.095</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Took nondegree courses</td>
<td>.100</td>
<td>.065</td>
<td>.601</td>
<td>.550</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

F = 3.454; df = 8, 73; p < .002
*P ≤ .05
tors, explaining at most a quarter of the variation in performance in this study. Other, unknown, factors explain a great deal of the variation in students’ achievement. To leave room for those unknown factors to operate suggests not relying solely on background characteristics, nor on other specific criteria. More importantly, social work programs value heterogeneity, both to further the professional mission against oppression and for the synergy it creates among students. Relying on any one set of criteria would increase homogeneity on those criteria. Faculty admissions ratings, precisely because they are idiosyncratic, will increase the heterogeneity among admitted students in ways that undoubtedly benefit social work as a whole.

A second argument for retaining faculty ratings of applicants is that, so long as the pool of applications is larger than the number admitted, some means must be used to determine who will be admitted. Using faculty admissions ratings evokes a cognitive dissonance effect that enhances *esprit de corps* (Festinger, 1957; Festinger & Aronson, 1968; Harmon-Jones & Mills, 1999). Faculty who believe they are selecting the students from an imperfect pool remain invested in the quality of their students and their education. Successful applicants are proud of their admission and have enhanced motivation. Unsuccessful applicants are not “rejected” because of some disbarring characteristic and, indeed, may be motivated to try harder. Further, a sense of fairness is important. One study of admissions procedures was initiated in part because applicants preferred to be admitted “on the basis of a benign (though possibly arbitrary) decision of faculty members rather than cast their fate to chance” (Maslany & Wiegand, 1974, 34).

In that same study, faculty decided to use admissions ratings rather than chance selection to determine which applicants to accept because they feared the consequences of admitting an obviously unsuitable applicant (Maslany & Wiegand, 1974, 35-36). This points to a weakness of this study, a sample of students who had successfully completed the MSW program. Faculty ratings may have eliminated the truly unsuitable candidates in the admissions process—a result that would suggest faculty success in ratings. Some students dropped out after admission, potentially cutting off the lower end of performance continuum. Everyone in the sample is considered a competent social worker by virtue of completing the program. In that sense, differences in performance among students are irrelevant. As limited as it is, the sample is similar to samples in other studies, all of which included currently enrolled or graduating students. Overcoming such a methodological problem requires admitting all applicants or randomly selecting those to admit,
procedures that require more courage or resources than most programs have available.

Another limitation of the sample is that only one social work program is included. The applicants, the faculty raters, and the admissions procedures may be peculiar to the program, although its procedures and criteria seem similar to those of other programs (Miller & Koerin, 1998). The results may not be applicable to other programs or other cohorts of students.

Another limitation of the study is that performance in school may not be an indicator of competence as a social worker. Students who do well in class and even in field may not become good social workers. Academic coursework may not be relevant to interpersonal skill, although we would argue that a minimal level of conceptual ability is necessary for competent social work practice. The field evaluation measures are closer to “real” practice skills than course grades. The Direct Practice Evaluation Instrument used here was developed with extensive consultation from local social workers to ensure that it included skills essential in day-to-day practice (McCarthy & Abramson, 1992). One can argue that field instructors are poor judges of student skills, but in one study, field instructors’ ratings correlated well with independent assessments based on the students’ clinical interviews (Reid, Bailey-Dempsey & Viggiani, 1996).

Despite limitations, the findings are consistent with previous studies, confirming that previous performance and academic preparation can predict graduate performance in a social work program. The study goes beyond previous studies in examining the interaction between applicant background characteristics and faculty ratings of the applicant. Overall, faculty admissions ratings do not add anything beyond background characteristics in predicting who will do well in graduate school. Faculty ratings of applicants may not be a necessary step in the admissions process. However, because of their idiosyncratic nature, faculty ratings serve the function of ensuring desirable heterogeneity in a student body.

REFERENCES


