

# Expanding Access to Flexible Education

**MU School of Social Work program top 25 in 2015**

**W**ITH A FULL-TIME SOCIAL WORK JOB AND TWO YOUNG CHILDREN, St. Louis resident Amanda O'Neal wasn't planning on pursuing a master's degree in 2014. But MU's new online master of social work program changed that.

"I absolutely would not have gone back without the all-online program," says O'Neal, who received an MU bachelor's degree in social work in 2007. "It offered me the flexibility of learning in my own home and setting my own schedule."

O'Neal, 31, was among the first to graduate in May from the MU School of Social Work online master's degree program. Established in the fall of 2014, the two-year program offers students who have received a bachelor's degree in social work within the previous seven years a chance to earn a master's degree completely online. About 40 students have enrolled in the program since its launch, says Dale Fitch, an associate professor in the School of Social Work and director of the program.

Fitch says the program aims to meet an education demand created by social workers like O'Neal, who was unable to find any other online master's degree program that did not have some on-campus requirement she couldn't meet. It's a demand that continues to grow. So much so that the School of Social Work is adding a "regular standing" track to the online program this fall that allows students with bachelor's degrees in other fields to earn a social work master's degree in three years.

## REFLECTING DEMAND

Both the original online program—dubbed the "advanced standing" track—and the new regular standing program reflect growth in the field. The Bureau of Labor Statistics website predicts a 12 percent growth rate in jobs for social workers between 2014 and 2024, higher than the 7 percent average growth rate across all occupations. Employment projections show considerably higher growth rates in health care as well as mental health and substance abuse social work specialties, though employment growth estimates for other specialties are close to the average for all occupations, according to the bureau's website.

Those projections fit with the observations of Stacy Snow, Mizzou Online's director of marketing and recruitment. Snow sees an upswing in the number of students interested in social work professions, putting the advanced standing master's degree on the same path as other MU online

graduate programs that she says grew by about 6 percent last year.

From Fitch's perspective, the program simply provides access to social workers whose education has been impeded in the past by their location or work or family obligations.

"The students we're reaching are students who can't come to Columbia," Fitch says. "But they still live in Missouri and they still want a degree from Mizzou—we're just making it possible for them."

## THE ONLINE CLASSROOM

While most of MU's current online social work master's pro-



gram students live in Missouri, residents of contiguous states—Arkansas, Illinois, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Nebraska, Oklahoma and Tennessee—are eligible to apply as well. All are part-time students, typically taking two courses each semester. They select either an advanced clinical practice concentration that focuses on services for directly intervening with individuals, families and other groups, or a policy, planning and administration in human services concentration that prepares them to work in such settings as social service organizations and government agencies.

Studies in both concentrations include narrated lectures, assigned readings and online discussion forums. Students also role-play online using video conferencing technologies to develop their personal interaction skills. While no student must participate online at a set time, classwork is not self-paced, Fitch emphasizes. He notes the program is semester-based and requires participation in classroom discussion. Indeed, Fitch considers the online discussion forums a way to potentially transform the discussion environment because they encourage

commentary from students who might ordinarily stay silent in an on-campus classroom.

"In an online environment, more introspective students are more likely to be heard," Fitch says.

## EARLY RECOGNITION

The program's blueprint was recognized during its first year, earning a No. 11 ranking in the Social Work Degree Guide's list of the top 25 online master's of social work programs in 2015.

Closer to home, the online program has won enough support to warrant its expansion. The new regular standing program kicks off in the fall with 40 students, Fitch says—far more than program administrators initially anticipated admitting in the program track's first year. Designed for people pursuing their first social work degrees after obtaining bachelor's degrees in other fields, the regular standing track's three-year duration reflects the additional coursework required to meet degree standards.

The same factors that sparked the creation of the original online program prompted the development of the regular standing version, Fitch says: "It was the same issues—demand and need and access."

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AMANDA O'NEAL