Staying Current after Graduation: A Survey of Social Work Alumni

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Abstract

How do our alumni stay current once they graduate and are away from academic information resources? Very few studies have addressed how alumni stay current in their field after graduation. This research surveyed the graduate and undergraduate Social Work alumni of The College at Brockport in asking key questions. Are you able to stay current with research, especially without access to article databases? Do you receive support from your employer to stay current? Does this include money/time off for participating in Continuing Education Programs (CEP), conferences or accessing article databases? This paper looks at the methods for, and importance of, staying current and analyzes results from a survey and makes recommendations for graduates, departments and librarians regardless of profession.

Introduction

Throughout their college years, students have access to academic research and are highly encouraged by librarians and faculty to use these resources before resorting to an internet search. Many students, however, graduate and move into the workforce with just Google and Wikipedia. Some alumni do have continued access to article databases for their profession, but many others are unaware, unwilling or unable to maintain access. With this in mind, the research presented here questions how social work alumni are staying current in their field.

This paper reports the findings of a survey given to graduate and undergraduate Social Work alumni of The College at Brockport of the State University of new York. The survey addresses a range of questions, asking if they are required to stay current, and if so, how are they able to do so, and what level of support do they receive from their employer.

Why is staying current so important?

There are many reasons to stay current. Staying current helps the professional advocate for their clients,[1] facilitates better communication with peers,[2] helps "negotiate the systems in which we practice,"[3] and, most of all, it is an "ethical obligation."[4] Additionally, staying current for social workers is important because of the many changes in the profession related to health care

information, clients, and organization.[5] The National Association of Social Workers (NASW)[6] and the Association of Oncology Social Work (AOSW)[7] also note the importance of staying current in their code of ethics. The greatest benefit, though, is the positive job satisfaction one gets from staying current.[8]

Staying current can be easy or difficult depending on the profession or the employer. Those professionals that have regular article database access, academics for example, have the advantage of staying current through institutionally supported current awareness services that have advanced over time, from photo-copied tables-of-contents to present-day journal and database access services such as RSS feeds.[9] In the profession of social work, the focus of this article, little exist by way of article database access in the workplace.[10]

During one library session in a Masters of Social Work (MSW) class, students were asked the question of how alumni stay current without access to university information resources. They noted that if they worked at an academic institution after graduation there would be greater potential for access to these information resources. But what if the alumni aren't associated with an academic institution? If they are not, it is likely such access is not available. This article reports the findings of a survey examining if and how social work alumni are actually staying current.

Literature Review

Scanning the research on how social workers stay current resulted in very little data. There were some data provided by general alumni surveys but these surveys related to curriculum decisions, evaluating alumni giving, assessing the university and department reputation in the community, and assessing post-degree experiences. The few articles about social workers staying current in their field actually focused more on the importance of currency than on whether or not social workers were, in fact, staying current with academic research. The few surveys of social worker alumni reported on and evaluated in-school experiences, post-MSW experiences,[11] alumni giving,[12] and hospital social worker surveys.[13] However, there exists some limited research on how social work alumni stay current in their field, although this comes mainly from the social work in the hospital environment.

Hospital social workers with access to RSS feed article databases report that is relatively easy to stay current as compared to respondents relying on internet searches for the same information. Additionally, these social workers typically benefit from employer assistance and funding to attend conferences. However, even with these benefits, hospital workers still encounter the same two impediments of all social workers trying to stay current: information overload and time constraints.

There are many articles and recommendations affirming the importance of staying current. For example, Gregorian notes that to "have what it takes"[14] to be a successful clinical social worker in teaching hospitals there is an implicit requirement to stay current with evidence-based research. There is also the need to apply that research to practice. Gregorian's list for success includes: identifying or diagnosing the psychological, emotional or social barriers that interfere with treatment, positive outcomes, or discharge-planning; clarifying and addressing conflicts that might arise between providers and the patient; advocating for patients and families; and writing, teaching and research, especially in academic medical centers.[15]

The Great Divide

Even with these recommendations, there continues to be a disconnection between what is suggested and what people are actually able to access. As Gibbons states, when students leave university a tough dose of reality awaits when they discover that so many of the scholarly resources they once took for granted through the university library are no longer available.[16] In the past, a professional could go also to the public library for research assistance and access to peer-reviewed articles. However, with budget cuts and community needs now leaning towards literacy programs, many public libraries have had to limit or completely eliminate specialized article databases and access to full-text articles.

Overview

The study discussed here consists of an observational retrospective examination of a preexisting database (n=46) with no participants' identifying information. These data had been collected through SURVEYMONKEY for internal usage that ran from February 2 to February 23, 2011.

Research Method

Data Collection

The original data set was obtained with the permission from the chair of The College at Brockport's Social Work Department. This department's undergraduate and graduate alumni from The College at Brockport were surveyed on the different aspects of staying current, professional requirements, employer support, available resources, and preferred strategies. The author and the department faculty collaborated on the wording of each question to ensure understandable vocabulary for both the undergraduate and graduate alumni.

A nine question survey utilizing a skip pattern was generated to collect quantitative and qualitative information. Of the 173 alumni that were emailed, 46 responded. For questions three to six and for question eight, multiple responses were allowed. All of the multiple-response questions permitted additional comments. The new hypothesis, objectives and dataset descrip-

tion were sent to The College at Brockport's Institutional Review Board for secondary data review and subsequent approval.

Data Analysis

Qualitative data came directly from the survey responses and quantitative data reflects numeric analysis of individual survey responses and comparisons of individual survey responses and individual job requirements.

Research Question for this study

Does employer type for social work alumni dictate the ability for the alumni to stay current?

Objectives

- To determine if there are differences in access to current research based on employer type.
- To determine what current research our alumni have to stay current.
- To inform our alumni that The College at Brockport is providing some article database access.

Purpose

In order to perform the job at the highest level, social workers need to stay current through access to research. Colleges and universities are beginning to work with their alumni offices to offer article database access as a benefit that comes with paying annual alumni dues. There are different levels of current research access. Some of alumni in this survey have access through conference attendance and journal subscriptions. The purpose of this research is to gain a better understanding of what social worker alumni may access and to see improve The College at Brockport's current academic offerings and the social worker alumni's knowledge of what is available.

Method

1) The association between employer type and current research access will be analyzed. The level of employer requirement to stay current in comparison to the level of employer funding for access to current research will be analyzed.

2) This study is an observational retrospective examination of a preexisting database (n=46) with no participants' identifying information. This data was already collected through a SURVEYMONKEY survey for internal usage that ran February 2 through February 23, 2011.

3) *Data Collection*: The professional demographic information was completed through the SURVEYMONKEY survey.

It was anticipated that the results would show there to be some difficulty in staying current without access to the article databases available at the college. In addition, it was not expected to find a significant percentage of alumni required to stay current without employer support to fund classes, access to journal articles, or time off for attending training and conferences.

Results

The first question was posed simply for a yes/no response: "Does your employer require you to stay current?" Almost 50% (22 out 45) of the alumni reported they did not need to stay current with research. The "yes" respondents to question one were asked to go to the second question, another for a yes/no response: "If your employer requires you to stay current, are you able to?" Of those reporting they are required to stay current, almost 60% indicated they are able to achieve this as needed, 32% reported "sometimes," with 12% indicating they were not at all able to stay current. See Graph A. The "yes" and "sometimes" respondents to question two were asked to go to the multiple-choice question three which asked the alumni to list the ways they were able to stay current. Respondents identified: attending conferences, reading online and print articles, attending continuing education classes, participating with their Local NASW Chapter, and utilizing social networks and blogs such as socialworkblock.org and Facebook.

Additional write-in responses included:

- nyapers.org
- I don't
- in-service trainings

- Facebook likes to national human service organizations and causes
- in-house trainings
- NASW on Facebook

These results agree with Smith and Cohen who note that the main formal learning activities that state licensing boards sanction, such as workshops, in-service trainings and conferences, are not always those that social workers cite as sources for practice.[17] Dattalo, in a similar survey, noted "a number of respondents commented that they read relatively little and depended primarily on their own life experiences as a knowledge base for their practice of therapy."[18] However, even with respondents reporting high conference attendance, easy access to online articles and participation in informal conversations, the alumni still find staying current difficult.

Question four, a multi-response question, brought all of the respondents back together in asking, "If you are unable to stay current, what might your reason(s) be?" The top reasons were: "lack of time," "employer does not cover expense of any journals," and "no personal income." Refer to Graph B a complete report of the results. These results confirmed the Powel and Case findings that

> … many former students joining the health care workforce find themselves confronted with "real world" factors that provide little time for them to search for and make optimal use of the best evidence from the research literature. Those who valued library instruction may now be in positions that preclude doing research in the ways in which they were trained during their undergraduate years. Perhaps because their information needs are immediate and schedules do not permit time for library searches, many therapists turn to the most easily accessible sources of information.[19]

These findings also agree with Allen, Nelson and Netting who note that social work professionals cannot or do not stay current for the following reasons: "(1) inconsistent national requirements, (2) inadequate professional education, (3) work overload (including inappropriate job emphasis, role ambiguity, and conflict of interest), and (4) structurally based professional power inequities."[20]

Additional write-in responses for question four included:

- I work at a very emotionally draining job and don't have the emotional energy after work to search out articles and other information
- No access to research data bases due to not being a student anymore; haven't had the need
- No longer work in SW field, but personally still interested in staying somewhat involved; not sure where to look.

Question five was another multiple-response question: "If your employer requires staff development, do they supply any of the following?" The results, illustrated by Graph C, show that staff development was not required for about 35% of the respondents. Of those respondents where staff development is a requirement, 45% reported receiving travel time and/or travel pay.

Additional write-in responses for question five included:

- state requires 6 hours of qualifying training per year
- employer does provide this training
- on-line training
- in-service meetings
- pay for conferences and trainings
- provides its own teleconferences & trainings
- speakers at staff meetings

Question six, also a multiple-response question, asked "What type of practice do you work for?" The results show most respondents work for community centers, hospitals, their own county and mental health centers. Graph D illustrates the results.

Additional write-in responses:

- nursing home long term care

- broker for people with MR
- nursing home setting
- health care - nursing home
- medical model/homecare
- skilled nursing facility
- nonprofit work with developmentally disabled individuals
- mental health clinic
- not related to social work
- chemical dependency unit
- not-for-profit
- in-house employee assistance program

It was anticipated that there would be agency types that would require staying current and other types that did not. However, it was found that within the same types of agencies there were some that require staying current and some that do not require staying current.

Question seven, requiring a yes or no response, asked, "If your computer technology knowledge was improved, do you think that would aid you in staying more current?" Over 60% of the respondents marked "no," but the remaining respondents marked "yes." See Graph E.

All of the write-in responses with this question went with the "no" respondents:

- I think I know enough about computer technology
- It´s time that I need more
- May help me locate information without as much effort
- I believe that I am computer savvy with finding research and useful items because of my MSW
- using library resources and internet citing
- n/a
- My technical skills are up to speed
- PowerPoint knowledge
- My knowledge is current
- knowledge of where to find resources needed
- lacking accessibility not knowledge
- I have excellent computer skills - but that doesn't help pay for conferences and journals

- I am literate with computers and technology

Question eight, a multiple-response question asked, "Would you be interested in finding out the cost of the following?" This question asked if the respondents would be interested in finding the costs for individual and group journal and database subscriptions. Graph F shows the overall results.

Additional comments:

- Not really. I can do my job with what I´ve learned so far
- No, because I don't really have any extra money
- n/a

Question nine asked for a yes or no response, "Did you know that as a College at Brockport Alumnus, you have access to two article databases?" Almost 90% of the respondents did not know about the access.

Additional comments:

- Thank you - I thought once my student sign-on was deactivated, I had no more access to computer system
- Thanks for the information
- I will definitely peruse these databases
- That is useful information!
- Thank you
- Thank you for the databases info
- I was able to find them
- I called Brockport's Alumni and Library Services in October to find out if alumni had any access to online resources and was told "no!" Thanks - I didn't know that!

The College at Brockport offers EBSCO Search – Academic Search Alumni Edition and EBSCO Search – Business Source Alumni Edition databases as well as JSTOR, Teacher Reference Center, Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts. Looking further at the individual surveys, it was found that four (17%) of the respondents noted they are required to stay current but do not receive any employer

support in the form of time off, monetary help for attending conferences or continuing education, or of direct access to full-text articles.

Discussion

The survey results indicated varying needs for alumni to stay current through access to information resources, employer support, and accountability for staying current. It is generally believed that alumni across the country are asking their schools for access to article databases and many schools can now accommodate them. As noted, Brockport alumni have access to two article databases: EBSCO Search – Academic Search Alumni Edition and EBSCO Search – Business Source Alumni Edition databases. These databases do not offer the complete range of full-text articles or journals that Academic Search Complete offers. The EBSCO Alumni databases are also available for purchase by schools that do not provide them through their current EBSCO agreement. EBSCO recently has also provided free access to a few more databases: Library, Information Science & Technology Abstracts (LISTA), Teacher Reference Center, and Greenfile.

JSTOR has been piloting a program that allows alumni full access to the same databases as students and faculty. As much as libraries would like to help their alumni, the fact is that many libraries cannot cover the cost of a second JSTOR database. To address this dilemma libraries are beginning to offer access to databases by collaborating with alumni offices to work out a fee-based system.[21] For example, the University of Buffalo and the University of Florida have partnered with alumni associations to provide free remote access through alumni association membership fees that includes remote access to JSTOR (along with the existing membership perks such as hotel and car rental discounts).

While The College at Brockport's Drake Library has the opportunity to participate in the JSTOR pilot program, the College's alumni association does not require membership fees and so the library-alumni office arrangement is not financially viable. Since the library's budget cannot support another JSTOR database, at this time Drake Library is still looking for a way to pro-

vide JSTOR access for its alumni. To participate in the JSTOR pilot, librarians are encouraged to contact JSTOR's Outreach and Participation team. Today's professional social worker needs access to peer-reviewed full-text articles, and schools bear some responsibility to meet this need. As Gibbons notes, "if the baton of lifelong learning cannot be passed on, university libraries are doing their alumni a great disservice if they allow [access] to drop at graduation."[22]

While students are still in school, as Powell and Case note, librarians and the social work department "must intensify their efforts to convey the importance of applying research information to patient care and inform students of ways to access this information after they graduate."[23] Departments should maintain contact after graduation as well as regularly update alumni on existing ways to stay current. Departments that do this are not only benefiting alumni, they also are benefiting the school inasmuch as well-informed and community-involved alumni represent the department and school in a positive light.[24]

Employers themselves should try their best to help social worker employees stay current. Not only does this benefit the employee, it also benefits their clients in promoting the best care available. There also is a return to the employer when a well-supported employee represents the employer to clients, to other professionals, and to the general public. Many employers are helping alumni stay current by giving time off and/or paying for conference attendance and for continuing education, as noted in question five. When employers do not have the budget to help their employees attend training and conferences, there are alternatives. For instance, NASW offers some accredited online courses that are CEU-eligible (a continuing education designation) through its WebEd program.[25] Web-based education today enjoys widespread acceptance in the academic community and online learning results have been shown to equal classroom instruction when the same instructional methods are used.[26] For those who do not think their technology skills are up to par, these technical issues can be quickly resolved, regardless of skill level.[27]

In addition to NASW, certain states, such as Idaho, are using what are called "Virtual Grand Rounds" (VGRs) to address the need for continuing education and to provide professional support for rural health professionals. VGRs help by bringing current evidence-based practice to the rural professionals[28] through interactive video conferencing with experts on important current topics. Encouragement should be given especially to those social workers who make special effort and take individual initiatives in continuing education, as evidenced in some of the responses, especially to question three. All of these types of support, as research shows, improve job satisfaction and employee retention.[29]

Alumni can also take advantage of opportunities to keep their technology skills up to date. For instance, many communities have local educational programs offering Microsoft Office courses for less than $100. There are also free online software tutorials. As Kaplan, Tomaszewski and Gorin maintain, being technologically adept enhances one's ability to acquire knowledge, develop strategies, and improve health and related services for clients.[30] These experiences in continuing education can have a direct bearing on overall professional performance. Damron-Rodgriquez report that the most effective strategy for social workers to convert evidence-based research into practice is to use the following in combination: clinical performance reviews, discussions with co-workers concerning problems and possible solutions, educational outreach visits, and interactive training that includes practice and discussion.[31]

Conclusion

The information gained from this study informs some librarians they need to be more diligent in collaborating with alumni offices in reaching social workers with up-to-date resources and helping them to stay current. This information also shows that some libraries need to collaborate with college departments in informing alumni through department-based or alumni office generated listservs and other modes of outreach. In short, libraries, college departments and alumni offices should collaborate to help social work alumni. While today's academ-

ic libraries might not be able to do as much for alumni as in the past, a joint effort of various units of a college or university can improve alumni services. As Gibbons notes, "Universities rely on alumni to be their ambassadors, and the provision of services that keep them connected both generates goodwill and equips them to be more effective on behalf of their alma mater."[32] Social workers who are well-trained, technologically up-to-date, and have ready access to peer-reviewed evidence-based articles overall have higher job satisfaction and engage in a life-long relationship with their alma mater. This in turn benefits the school with positive representatives and effective ambassadors.

Endnotes

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[30] Kaplan, Tomaszewski and Gorin, 159.

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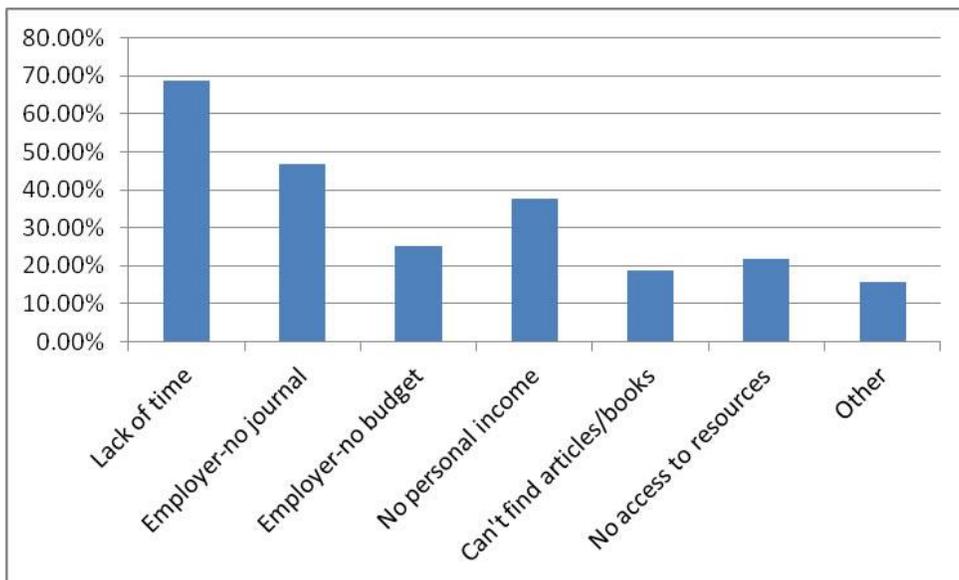
[32] Gibbons, 28.

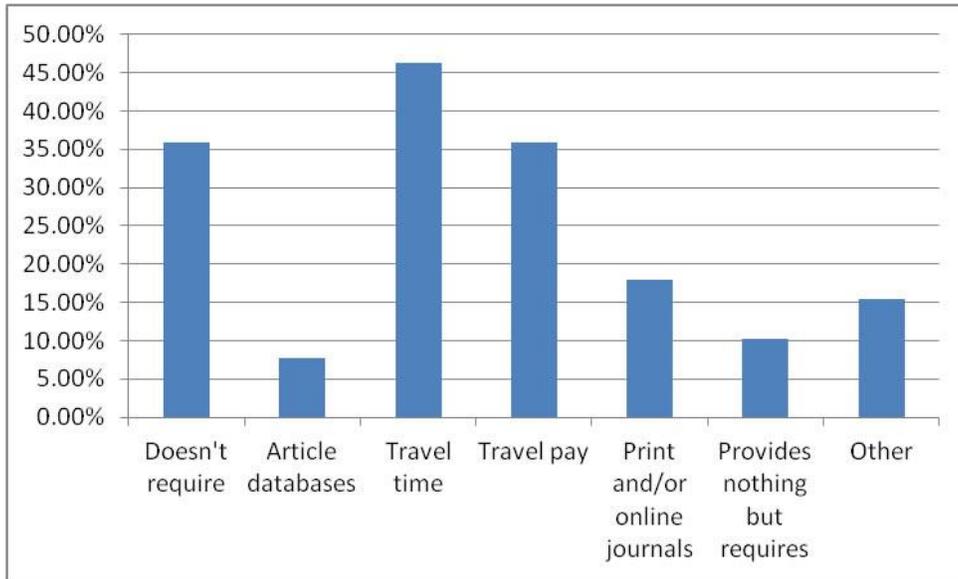**Appendix A**

Graphs of Survey Results

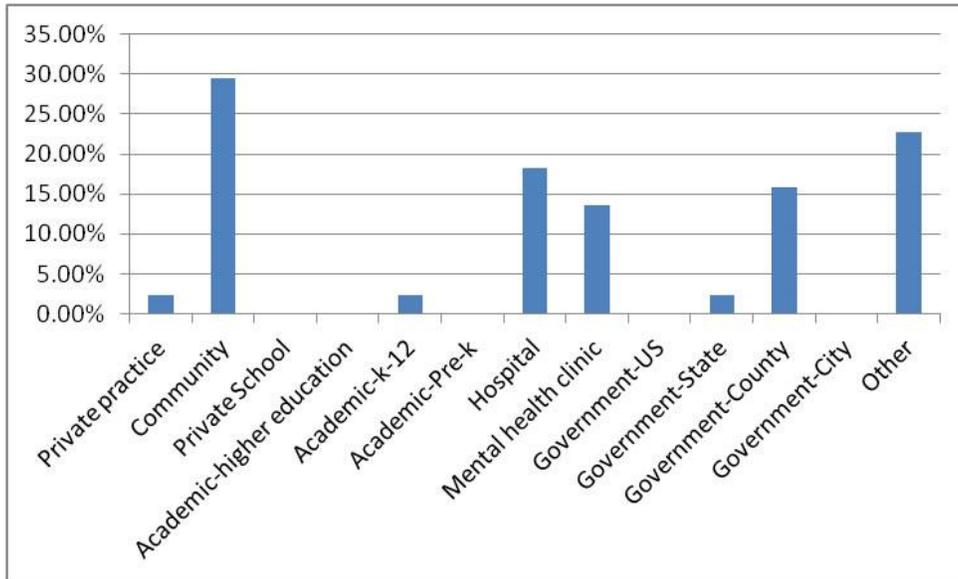Graph A: **Ways in which you are able to stay current**
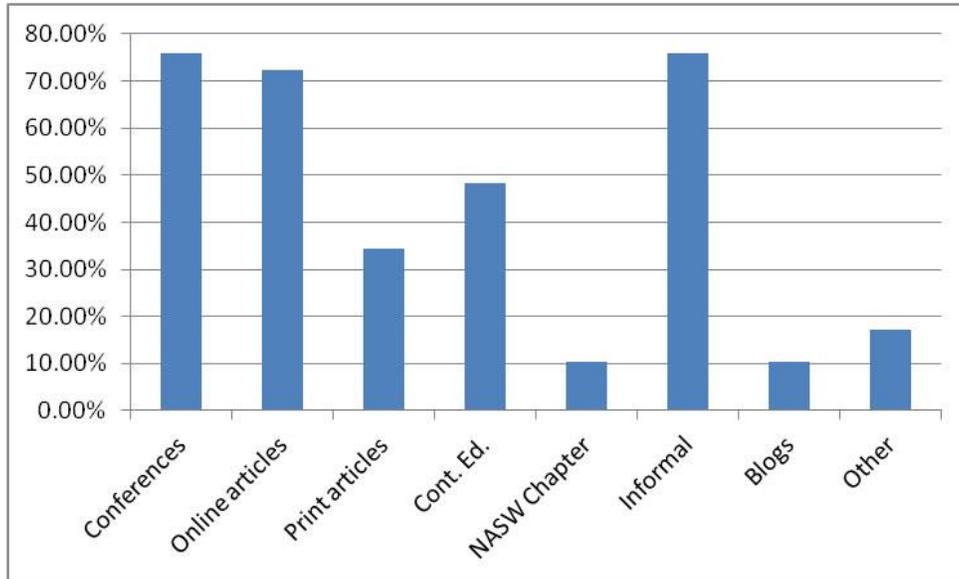
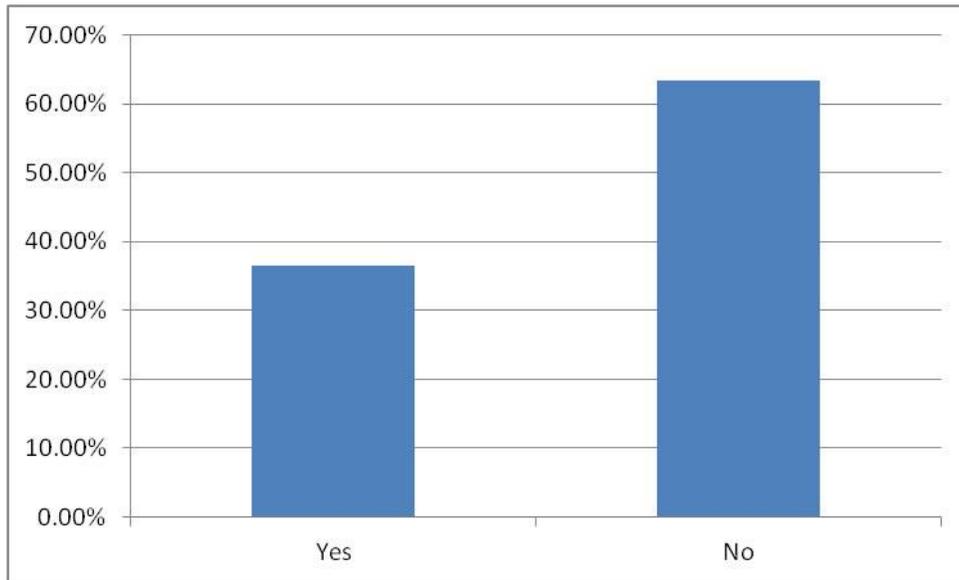Graph B: **If you are unable to stay current what might your reason(s) be?**

Graph C: **If your employer requires staff development, do they supply any of the following?**
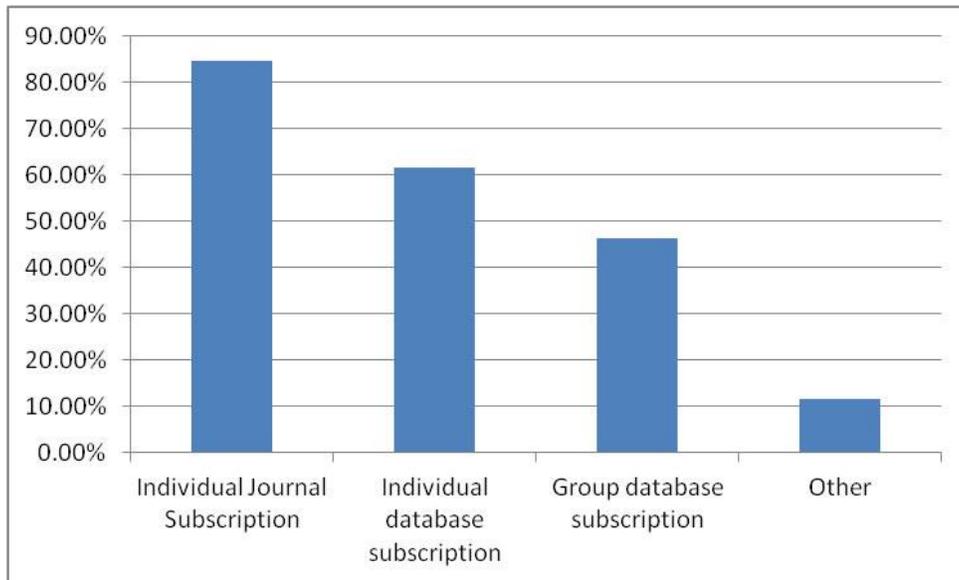

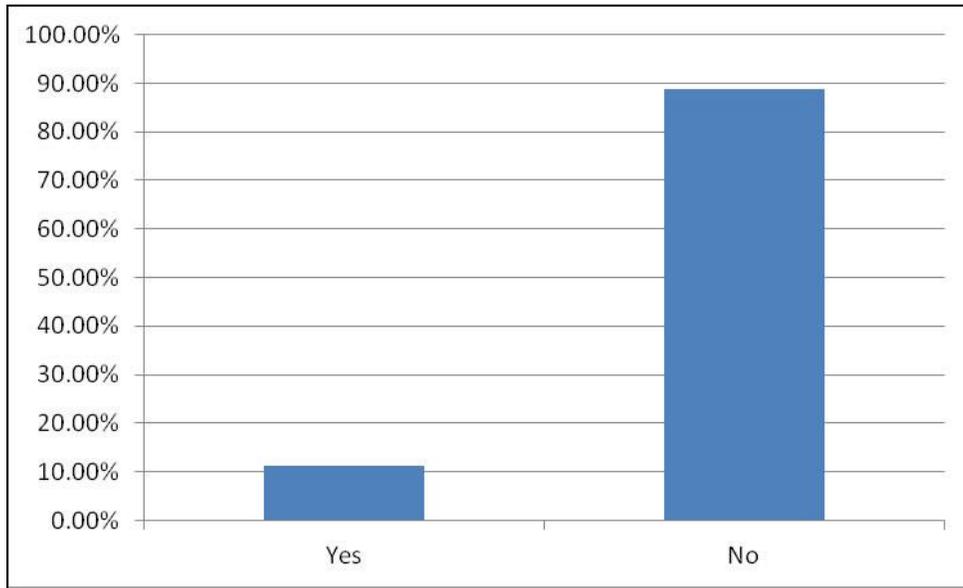Graph D: **What type of practice do you work for?**

Graph E: **If your computer technology knowledge was improved, do you think that this would aid you in staying more current?**

Graph F: **Would you be interested in finding out the cost of the following?**

Graph G: **Knowledge of access to databases**

Appendix B

Survey Questions

1. Does your employer require you to stay current, that is, up to date with the latest research and trends, in your job?
Yes – Respond, and then go to Question 2
No - Respond, and then go to Question 4

2. If your employer requires you to stay current, are you able to?
Yes - Respond, and then go to Question 3
Sometimes – Respond, and then go to Question 3
No - Respond, and then go to Question 4

3. Ways in which you stay current? Respond and then go to question 5.
Conferences
Online articles
Print articles
Continuing Education
Local NASW Chapter
Informal, in person connections with colleagues
Chat with others through a web site such as socialworkblog.org
Other (please specify)

4. If you are unable to stay current, what might your reason(s) be?
Lack of time
My employer doesn't provide a budget for journal subscriptions
My employer doesn't provide a budget for attending conferences

5. If your employer requires staff development, do they supply any of the following? (Check all that apply.)
Doesn't require
Article Databases
Travel Time
Travel Pay
Print and/or online Journals
Doesn't supply anything, but does require staff development
Other (please specify) I don't have the income
Cannot find the articles/books I need
No access to resources
Other (please specify)

6. What type of practice do you work for? (Check all that apply.)
Private Practice
Community
Private School
Academic - Higher Education
Academic - K-12
Academic - Pre-K
Hospital
Mental Health Clinic
Government - U.S.

Government - State
Government - County
Government - City
Other (please specify)

7. If your computer technology knowledge was improved, do you think that would aid you in staying more current?
Yes
No
Comments

8. Would you be interested in finding out the cost for the following?
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