

Racial Justice Advocacy: Evaluating Virtual Social Action Initiatives in Social Work Education through Transformative Learning Theory

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Abstract: *This exploratory case study examined how participation in virtual racial justice advocacy initiatives influenced social work students' perceived confidence, commitment, and engagement. Guided by Transformative Learning Theory, the study applied quantitative methods using pre- and post-surveys with 135 BSW and MSW students. Students participated in a school-wide initiative, either in a Legislative Education and Advocacy Day (LEAD) webinar series or a student-led virtual small group project. Results demonstrated significant increases in students' perceived confidence across several advocacy-related tasks. Specifically, students showed increased engagement in racial dialogue, particularly across lines of racial difference, while maintaining high levels of commitment. Notably, confidence in critically analyzing race and power at work increased from $M = 6.63$ ($SD = 2.46$) to $M = 7.39$ ($SD = 2.26$), $p < .001$, and confidence in making space for bold conversations rose from $M = 6.79$ ($SD = 2.48$) to $M = 7.50$ ($SD = 2.22$), $p < .001$. Students also showed increased readiness to lead racial dialogues across groups ($p = .003$) and a significant gain in commitment to lead advocacy efforts ($p = .027$). These findings highlight how virtual advocacy initiatives can advance social work education by strengthening macro-level competencies, particularly as online social work degree programs expand.*

Keywords: *Racial justice, social work education, transformative learning theory, virtual advocacy*

In response to heightened sociopolitical tensions and the ongoing struggle for racial equity, social work education has placed renewed emphasis on macro-level practice, particularly in the area of racial justice advocacy (Gal & Weiss-Gal, 2023). Advancing racial justice aligns with the profession's ethical mandate to promote social justice and directly addresses systemic inequities that disproportionately harm marginalized communities. These disparities span health, education, employment, and access to essential resources, underscoring the urgent need for social workers equipped to confront them. Preparing students to serve as effective change agents requires more than theoretical knowledge: it demands advocacy skill-building, which can be developed through experiential learning opportunities (Apgar, 2021; Hoefer, 2019).

Experiential learning, often captured by the phrase "learning by doing," is a cornerstone of advocacy pedagogy in social work education. Hands-on experiences can provide students with the tools to understand, engage in, and sustain justice-oriented work (Beimers, 2016; Kilbane et al., 2013; Nowakowski-Sims & Kumar, 2021). Common

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approaches include statehouse advocacy events such as Legislative Education and Advocacy Day (LEAD) or lobby days, classroom-based case studies, collaborative group projects, voter registration efforts, and campus-wide campaigns (Beimers, 2016; Lane et al., 2012; Lewis et al., 2023; Nowakowski-Sims & Kumar, 2021). Evidence suggests that exposure to advocacy practice as students increases the likelihood that students will engage in it throughout their careers (Pritzker & Burwell, 2016; Pritzker & Giraldo-Santiago, 2023).

Social work online learning was first introduced in the late 1990s and early 2000s (Petracchi, 2000; Wilke & Vinton, 2006), yet it was not fully embraced until the COVID-19 pandemic. Online learning represents an advancement in social work education, suggesting expanded access and accommodating diverse learners' needs (Groton & Spadola, 2022; Lanzieri et al., 2024). Further, as the COVID-19 pandemic forced the shift to online learning, this prompted widespread adoption of virtual platforms for teaching and education, demonstrating that online approaches can be both feasible and effective (Jun et al., 2021). However, there is limited research on how virtual advocacy experiences influence students' development of key macro practice competencies. This study begins to address the gap by examining social work students' perceived changes in confidence, commitment, and engagement after participating in a school-wide virtual racial justice initiative.

Social Action and Advocacy Work

Advocacy and political engagement have long been foundational to the mission of social work, yet the profession's actual engagement in these arenas has varied considerably over time (Ezell, 1993; Ritter, 2008). Since its inception in 1955, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) has promoted political involvement as a professional responsibility. Despite this long-standing emphasis, studies have consistently highlighted uneven levels of activism across the profession, arguing that the main barrier is the predominant clinical focus (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2022; Ezell, 1993; Ritter, 2008).

The social work profession's involvement in advocacy has also fluctuated in response to shifting sociopolitical contexts. For example, periods of heightened social activism, such as the Civil Rights Era, prompted increased policy engagement. However, in later decades, the profession exhibited a retrenchment toward individualized, therapeutic models of practice (Bliss & Ginn, 2021; Weiss-Gal, 2017; Wolk, 1981). These ebbs and flows reflect broader tensions within the profession between its social justice commitments and the realities of professionalization, licensing requirements, and funding structures that often prioritize clinical work.

One response to these dynamics has been the implementation of state-level LEAD or lobby day events, designed to engage social work students in legislative advocacy and public policy discourse. Organized by NASW chapters and other educational bodies, LEAD programs provide a structured and organized opportunity for students to engage with lawmakers, analyze pending legislation, and practice core advocacy skills. As a result of these advocacy events, participation in LEAD and similar events have increased

students' confidence in political settings and enhanced their long-term commitment to social justice (Beimers, 2016; Kilbane et al., 2013; Nowakowski-Sims & Kumar, 2021).

More recently, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic and ongoing technological advancements have accelerated a shift toward virtual and hybrid models of advocacy education. In social work, this evolution has prompted a growing reliance on digital platforms, including social media, as tools for organizing, mobilizing, and raising awareness about systemic injustices. Bullock and Colvin (2018) and Gilster et al. (2020) emphasize the relevance of digital advocacy for social workers and the potential of social media to broaden the reach of social justice efforts. Virtual initiatives like LEAD events have expanded access to advocacy opportunities but also raise important questions about their impact on student learning outcomes. This study builds on that imperative by exploring how structured, online advocacy initiatives may support transformative learning and advance students' confidence, commitment, and engagement in racial justice work.

Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS)

Social work education has long emphasized the importance of advocacy as central to the profession's ethical and pedagogical commitments. This emphasis is formally articulated in the 2022 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) developed by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE), which define the competencies required for program accreditation. Specifically, Competency 5 charges students with the ability to engage in policy practice and advocate for human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice upon graduation (CSWE, 2022). These initiatives provide a direct vehicle for operationalizing Competency 5. Through LEAD events, students critically analyze social policies, develop evidence-informed perspectives, and engage with elected officials in advocacy dialogues. The Social Action Committee further supports Competency 5 outcomes by guiding students to design and implement advocacy campaigns, mobilize peers, and assess the impact of their efforts on community change. Together, these activities offer structured opportunities for students to practice concrete advocacy skills, such as contacting elected officials, participating in policy discussions, and engaging in organized advocacy events, thereby strengthening their capacity for policy engagement and social action. This expectation is also reinforced by the NASW *Code of Ethics-6.04*, which explicitly calls on social workers to participate in social and political action aimed at addressing systemic inequality and ensuring equitable access to basic resources and opportunities (NASW, 2021).

Despite these standards, numerous scholars have noted that classroom instruction often underprepared students for macro-level advocacy (Bernklau Halvor, 2016; Rogerson et al., 2022; Schneider & Netting, 1999) due to historical long-standing tension within the profession (Abramovitz, 1993; Haynes, 1998; Kam, 2014; Pritzker & Lane, 2017). This professionalization trend, while advancing legitimacy and licensure, may inadvertently marginalize advocacy training within curricula, leading to uneven student exposure to macro practice (Reeser & Epstein, 1987; Weiss-Gal, 2017).

Recently, in light of the sociopolitical polarization and racialized violence, there has been a renewed push to reintegrate macro practice into social work education—particularly

racial justice advocacy (Copeland & Ross, 2021; Lynch, 2024). Scholars argue that addressing structural oppression must remain central to social work pedagogy and that programs must adopt innovative educational strategies to support this mission (Beimers, 2016; Nowakowski-Sims & Kumar, 2021; Powell & Causby, 1994). These innovations include immersive, action-oriented experiences that align with both EPAS competencies and the profession's ethical mandates.

As technology advances and the political landscape changes, social work educators continue to explore innovative and effective ways to promote advocacy skills and connect policy to practice. The Social Action Committee at Adelphi University School of Social Work introduced one of these innovative initiatives. This annual program is a school-wide initiative that addresses various topics related to social justice, such as racial, gender, environmental, economic, and human rights issues. Students participate in small groups in an online setting, learning social action skills through hands-on experiences using various modalities. Another innovative initiative included here was LEAD when it pivoted to virtual programming in 2021.

Virtual Advocacy Initiatives

Under this initiative students were given the option to select either (1) a small-group virtual action project or (2) LEAD webinar series. Both initiatives were designed to fulfill seven practicum hours of required social action engagement and centered on racial justice advocacy.

The first option involved student-led virtual small groups, each comprising 5 to 9 students, who collaboratively developed advocacy projects over a ten-week period (February–April 2021). Each group selected a racial justice issue: criminal justice reform, healthcare disparities, housing, gender equity, media representation, education, or racism within the social work profession, as well as a preferred modality of engagement. Modalities included social media campaigns, podcasts, informational brochures, fundraising initiatives, and written advocacy (e.g., letters or op-eds). The small group projects were facilitated through Moodle, where students accessed curated resources, including scholarly articles, TED Talks, videos, white papers, and materials from advocacy organizations. This initiative was grounded in a social action-oriented framework and emphasized collaborative, experiential learning to promote racial justice awareness and skills development.

The second option was a four-part LEAD webinar series, a structured program hosted by the New York State Social Work Education Association that focused on racial justice advocacy. The first session centered on advocacy for racial equity legislation in New York State. The second explored the intersection of technology and racial justice. The third addressed voting as an act of social work, while the final session featured conversations with elected officials who were also trained social workers. This series took place throughout March 2021. We monitored this process through Zoom registration by a dedicated member of the Committee attending each session, and regardless of option selection, all students submitted a three-part required process recording. Process recordings served a dual purpose. They functioned as a structured reflective tool, prompting students

to critically examine their advocacy intentions, actions, and emotional responses, and as a formative assessment tool that allowed practicum instructors to gauge emerging advocacy skills and provide students with feedback, rather than as a solely summative evaluation.

Theoretical Framework: Transformative Learning Theory

Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1981, 1997), provides a framework for understanding how adults revise deeply held assumptions through critical reflection and experience. Mezirow (1997) defines transformative learning as “the process of effecting change in a frame of reference” (p. 5). A frame of reference consists of the structures of assumptions—shaped by culture, context, and prior experiences—through which individuals understand the world. These include both habits of mind (broad, enduring predispositions such as ethnocentrism or ideology) and points of view (more immediate beliefs and judgments that are subject to change through dialogue and learning) (Mezirow, 1997).

There are several core assumptions of Transformative Learning Theory that are relevant for adult education in professional fields like social work (Mezirow, 1997). These include: (1) that adult learners possess socially constructed frames of reference; (2) that transformative learning occurs through disorienting dilemmas that provoke critical reflection; (3) that learning is facilitated by dialogue and rational discourse; (4) that transformation can involve both sudden and incremental changes; and (5) that the process ultimately leads to more autonomous, inclusive, and socially responsible action. Together, these assumptions suggest that adult learners grow most meaningfully when challenged to question their assumptions and act on new, critically assessed perspectives.

This study applies Transformative Learning Theory to explore how social work students might experience a change in their perspectives related to racial justice advocacy. Although this study does not directly measure changes in students’ frames of reference as defined by Mezirow, it does examine self-reported changes in three interrelated outcomes: confidence, commitment, and engagement. These outcomes may represent meaningful proxies for early stages of perspective transformation. Prior scholarship notes that changes in self-efficacy, willingness to participate in dialogue, and readiness to act often signal movement toward critically reassessing assumptions and adopting more socially responsible stances, even when deeper structural shifts are not directly captured (Jemal & Frasier, 2021; O’Neill et al., 2024). In this context, increases in confidence to analyze racism, heightened readiness to engage in racial dialogue, and strengthened commitment to collective action may reflect incremental but significant components of transformative learning. Thus, Transformative Learning Theory offers an interpretive framework for understanding how exposure to structured, justice-oriented advocacy initiatives, even in virtual environments, can support transformative learning.

Methods

Research Design

This exploratory single-site case study situated within one school of social work employed a quantitative, pre- and post-test survey design to assess perceived changes in racial justice advocacy outcomes among matriculated social work students (Gilgun, 1994). The research focused on a school-wide virtual advocacy initiative implemented during the Spring 2021 semester, in which students fulfilled a practicum requirement by participating in one of two approved virtual options: (1) a student-led small-group racial justice action project or (2) LEAD webinar series. The study examined whether engagement in this initiative, regardless of the specific option selected, was associated with changes in students' self-reported levels of confidence, commitment, and engagement in addressing racial justice issues.

Data were collected at a large school of social work located in the northeastern United States with several extension sites serving a diverse student body. Participants included undergraduate (BSW) and graduate (MSW) students enrolled in practicum internship placements, all of whom were required to complete seven hours of social action activities. Descriptive information about the sample is provided in Table 1a.

Sample

A total of 485 BSW and MSW students enrolled in practicum courses during the Spring 2021 semester were invited to participate in this project. Of those invited, 301 students (62.1%) completed the pre-program survey, and 190 (39.2%) completed the post-program survey. A total of 135 students (27.8%) voluntarily completed the pre- and post-surveys and consented to participate in the research. Among the 135 students, 39 in the small-group projects and 96 participated in the LEAD series.

Recruitment

This study used a convenience sampling strategy to recruit eligible participants. Inclusion criteria required that students be (1) adult, matriculated BSW or MSW students; (2) enrolled in a field practicum course during the Spring 2021 semester, thereby required to complete a school-wide social action initiative; and (3) willing to voluntarily complete both the pre- and post-initiative surveys associated with the research study.

Recruitment efforts were led by the Social Action Committee and followed a structured outreach plan. An initial announcement was emailed to all eligible students, outlining the purpose of the initiative and the two approved participation options: the student-led, small-group racial justice project or the LEAD webinar series. Follow-up communications were sent via email to students, faculty, practicum liaisons, instructors, and relevant administrative staff to encourage participation and provide ongoing clarification about expectations.

Students received a secure link to the online pre-activity survey, which included a consent form, baseline questions related to racial justice knowledge and attitudes, and a section to select their preferred advocacy activity. Throughout the implementation period, two graduate student assistants supported the initiative by curating resources within the university's learning management platform (Moodle), facilitating communication with student group leaders, and tracking group progress.

To promote participation in the research component of the initiative, students who completed both the pre- and post-surveys were entered into a randomized drawing to receive one of twenty-five \$25 gift cards. The research study received exempt status from the Institutional Review Board due to its alignment with standard educational practices and minimal risk to participants.

Measures

Data for this study were collected using web-based survey software (Qualtrics) and consisted of two components: a required section for program operations and evaluation, and a voluntary section used for research purposes. The pre-program survey gathered basic demographic information, including gender, age, racial and ethnic identity, degree program (BSW or MSW), student ID number, and campus location. Following this section, participants completed a series of questionnaires designed to assess their advocacy-related perceptions and experiences.

To evaluate students' self-reported learning outcomes, the research team developed two exploratory instruments focused on key dimensions of racial justice advocacy: confidence, commitment, and engagement. The *Racial Justice Social Work Confidence and Commitment Questionnaire* consisted of 12 items designed to assess students' perceived ability (confidence) and intention/motivation (commitment) to engage in advocacy-related activities relevant to racial justice. Confidence was defined as one's self-perceived ability to perform specific advocacy tasks, while commitment reflected a value-driven prioritization to continue such practices as part of one's future professional identity (Pritzker & Lane, 2017). Advocacy related tasks included activities such as contacting elected officials, organizing or attending rallies, and engaging in policy discussions. Each item asked students to rate their confidence and commitment separately using a 10-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("None at all") to 10 ("Greatest amount"), with midpoint anchors such as 5 ("Sometimes"). The decision to use a 10-point scale was made to reduce forced-choice limitations, increase sensitivity, and potentially yield more differentiated responses.

In addition, students completed the *Racial Dialogue Engagement Questionnaire*, a four-item measure developed by the research team to assess students' willingness and readiness to participate in conversations about race and racism. Engagement was defined as the active participation in dialogues that confront racism and promote equity, particularly across lines of racial difference (Sue et al., 2009). Items examined both intra-group (within one's own racial or ethnic group) and inter-group (across racial or ethnic differences) contexts and included self-ratings of willingness to participate in and readiness to lead such dialogues. These questions were inspired by the sociopolitical climate of early

2021 and the literature on racial dialogue in social work. Responses were recorded on a 5-point Likert scale ranging from 1 (“Not at all”) to 5 (“Extremely”), with higher scores indicating greater engagement. These questionnaires, while grounded in advocacy and racial justice literature, are exploratory and were tailored for use in this unique educational context. Further validation is recommended in future research.

Analysis

Descriptive statistics were used to summarize student socio-demographic characteristics through univariate analysis. Prior to conducting inferential tests, the dependent variables were examined to assess normality and homogeneity of variance. Exploratory research questions guided the analysis of changes in perceived confidence, commitment, and engagement related to racial justice advocacy across pre- and post-activity periods.

To examine these changes, paired-sample *t*-tests were used to assess mean differences on the questionnaire items. Additionally, Chi-square tests and independent-sample *t*-tests were used to explore potential associations between key variables and demographic characteristics, including racial and ethnic identity. While some variance by race and ethnicity was observed, the sample size and distribution were insufficient to justify the inclusion of control variables or multivariate analysis, such as regression modeling. All analyses were conducted using SPSS version 28.

Table 1. *Socio-Demographic Characteristics of Participants (n=135)*

Characteristic	Category	n (%)
Gender	Male	15 (11.1%)
	Female	116 (85.9%)
	No Response	4 (3.0%)
Age	< 24	34 (25.2%)
	25 & older	99 (73.3%)
	No Response	2 (1.5%)
Race	BIPOC	68 (50.4%)
	Non-Hispanic White	57 (42.2%)
	No Response	10 (7.4%)
Degree	BSW	22 (16.3%)
	MSW	101 (82.2%)
	No Response	12 (1.5%)

Results

Sample Characteristics

A total of 135 students completed the pre- and post-surveys. Table 1 displays the distributions of this sample across several socio-demographic categories. About half

(50.4%) of the participants self-identified as persons of color (Black or African American, Hispanic or Latine, Asian, or mixed race), 42.2% identified as non-Hispanic White and 7.4% chose not to respond; 85.9% identified as female, 11.1% as male, while 3.0% chose not to respond. Age ranged from 20 to 67, with a mean age of 43. Most (82.0%) participants were MSW students, while 16.3% were BSW students and 1.5% chose not to respond. We dichotomized age into two groups: 24 and under as traditional learners; and 25 and above as non-traditional or returning learners, as defined by MacDonald (2018).

Logistic regression analysis revealed that only the LEAD variable significantly influenced survey completion. Participants who selected the LEAD initiative were 61% more likely to complete the survey than those in group projects ($p = 0.011$). Additionally, there were no statistically significant differences between the activity preference (group project or LEAD) and individual outcome variables ($p = .08 - .80$).

Racial Justice Social Work Confidence and Commitment Questionnaire

Table 2 presents the results of paired samples T-tests. Students demonstrated a significant increase in *confidence* levels in five out of six areas (0.64 to 0.80, $p = 0.001$ to 0.007). The five areas include Forming or leading groups ($M = 0.70$, $p < 0.003$); Participating in demonstrations ($M = 0.80$, $p < 0.003$); Critically analyzing issues of power/race/oppression/privilege ($M = 0.76$, $p < 0.001$); Interrogating hidden biases ($M = 0.64$, $p < 0.007$); and Making space for bold conversations in your work with individuals, families, and groups ($M = 0.71$, $p < 0.001$). Student *commitment* to racial justice advocacy work significantly increased in just one area: Forming or leading groups to influence others regarding social issues and policies ($M = 0.50$, $p < 0.027$).

Dialogue Engagement Questionnaire

As shown in Table 3, students reported a significant increase in their perceived confidence level in three out of six areas. These three areas were: Leading dialogue with individuals from one's own racial group ($M = 0.27$, $p < 0.023$), Leading dialogue with different racial groups ($M = 0.31$, $p < 0.003$), and Challenging others' racial biases with people from racial groups other than one's own ($M = 0.28$, $p < 0.002$). A notable and significant decrease in engagement was found in joining dialogues about race and racism with individuals from racial groups other than one's own ($M = -0.27$, $p < 0.001$).

Table 2. Results From Racial Justice Social Work Confidence and Commitment Questionnaire (n=135)

	Self-Assessment [Mean (SD/SE)]					
	Commitment			Confidence		
	Pre [SD]	Post [SD]	Difference [SE]	Pre [SD]	Post [SD]	Difference [SE]
Corresponding with elected officials regarding social issues and policies.	5.8 (2.64)	5.7 (2.68)	-0.1 (0.25)	5.7 (2.87)	6.00 (2.59)	0.3 (0.23)
Forming or leading groups to influence others regarding social issues and policies.	5.2 (2.53)	5.7 (2.68)	0.5 (0.23)*	5.1 (2.69)	5.8 (2.58)	0.7 (0.23)**
Participating in demonstrations or rallies about social issues and policies.	5.4 (2.81)	5.9 (2.72)	0.5 (0.25)	5.5 (2.86)	6.3 (2.59)	0.8 (0.26)**
Critically analyzing issues of power, race, oppression, and privilege at your place of employment.	7.3 (2.47)	7.6 (2.24)	0.4 (0.24)	6.6 (2.46)	7.4 (2.26)	0.8 (0.20)***
Interrogating hidden biases regarding your work with individuals, families, and/or groups.	7.3 (2.41)	7.6 (2.44)	0.4 (0.23)	6.7 (2.39)	7.3 (2.41)	0.6 (0.23)**
Making space for bold conversations in your work with individuals, families, and/or groups.	7.6 (2.74)	8.0 (2.06)	0.4 (0.20)	6.8 (2.48)	7.5 (2.22)	0.7 (0.20)***

All items rated on a 10-point Likert scale where 1 = none at all to 10 = greatest amount.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Table 3. Results From the Dialogue Engagement Questionnaire (n=133)

	Self-Assessment [Mean (SD/SE)]					
	From my own racial group			From racial groups other than my own		
	Pre [SD]	Post [SD]	Difference [SE]	Pre [SD]	Post [SD]	Difference [SE]
Joining dialogue about race and racism with people...	4.2 (1.02)	4.2 (0.99)	0.1 (0.08)	3.9 (1.06)	3.7 (0.93)	-0.3 (0.07)***
Leading dialogue about race and racism with people...	3.4 (1.28)	3.7 (1.2)	0.3 (0.12)*	2.8 (1.21)	3.1 (1.22)	0.3 (0.10)**
Challenging others' racial biases with people...	3.8 (1.17)	4.0 (1.03)	0.2 (0.009)	3.2 (1.15)	3.5 (1.16)	0.3 (0.09)**

All items are on a 5-point Likert Scale where 1 = not at all, 3 = neutral, and 5 = confident.

* $p < 0.05$, ** $p < 0.01$, *** $p < 0.001$

Discussion

This study assessed 135 students from a large school of social work on their perceived changes in their confidence, commitment, and engagement in racial justice work before and after their participation in one of the virtual school-wide social action initiatives. The results, discussed through the lens of Transformative Learning Theory, suggest a modest increase in students' perceptions of engagement with and confidence in promoting racial justice advocacy. More specifically, students' perceptions of confidence in racial justice activism activities significantly increased in forming or leading groups, participating in demonstrations, critically analyzing racism issues, interrogating hidden biases, and making space for bold conversations in their work with individuals, families, and groups. These results align with Transformative Learning Theory assumptions, which posit that individuals transform their perspectives and behavior through critical reflection and active engagement (Mezirow, 1997). It is also supported by the findings of Day et al. (2023), indicating how participating in events like LEAD may change social work students' perceptions of being a social justice advocate.

Alternatively, these perceived increases could be attributed to a combination of anti-racist work in the classroom, practicum education training, as well as a growing awareness and understanding of racial inequality throughout the initiative. During this time, the school of social work and the university made extensive preparation efforts related to racial justice initiatives. Initiatives included decolonizing syllabi to address diversity, equity, inclusion, and belonging (DEIB) and university-wide community training workshops focusing on cultural humility and DEIB dialogue. Students were challenged to reflect critically on their preconceived notions of race, power, and social justice, which may have led to shifts in their frames of reference.

Despite these gains in confidence, the results showed no statistically significant change in five out of six items related to commitment on the *Racial Justice Social Work Confidence & Commitment Questionnaire*. This finding offers several interpretations. First, students in their advanced year may have a pre-existing commitment to racial justice, as emphasized by the NASW Code of Ethics (NASW, 2021). This ceiling effect may have limited the capacity to detect significant change over time. Second, while Transformative Learning Theory posits that perspective transformation can result in behavior change, the process may not unfold uniformly across individuals or in short timeframes (Mezirow, 1997). Thus, while students may report increased confidence in engaging in advocacy work, their commitment—defined as sustained motivation to act—may require deeper or longer-term exposure, reinforcement, and opportunity.

This interpretation aligns with Ritter (2008) and Pritzker and Lane (2017) indicating that social work education often boosts political self-efficacy (e.g., confidence), but not necessarily policy-related action. For example, students may report, “I feel confident to contact a legislator,” yet not follow through due to time constraints, uncertainty, or lack of structural support. This gap between knowing and doing is consistent with research documenting the difficulty of converting policy training into practice behavior (Hoefer, 2019).

The only significant increase on the commitment scale was in forming or leading groups to influence others regarding social issues and policies. This finding suggests a potential area of activation, in which students begin to see themselves as facilitators of collective action, which is a key macro-level competency that bridges clinical and policy realms. This result also challenges assumptions that clinically oriented students disengage from macro practice (CSWE, 2022). Instead, it demonstrates that macro and micro orientations are not mutually exclusive, particularly when framed as part of racial justice advocacy. Austin et al. (2016) and Apgar (2021) argue that bridging the historical divide between micro and macro practice requires intentional curricular integration of macro competencies, such as leadership and policy engagement, into clinical training. Building on this, Jemal and Frasier (2021) emphasize that experiential, justice-oriented group projects can improve critical consciousness and empower students to view themselves as collective change agents. Further supporting this perspective, Pizzo et al. (2025), highlight that online project-based learning in small groups enhances leadership development among social work students, increasing their confidence in promoting social work values within their communities.

The results from the *Dialogue Engagement Questionnaire* revealed increases in students' perceived readiness to lead discussions within their own racial group, engage across racial groups, and challenge others' racial biases. These findings align with Transformative Learning Theory (Mezirow, 1997), which highlights the role of dialogue in increasing critical reflection and perspective transformation. Although no formal intragroup dialogue was structured as part of this initiative, students' informal discussions within identity-similar groups may have offered psychologically safer spaces to process complex emotions and examine internalized biases, thereby supporting transformative learning (Lerner & Kim, 2024; Weller et al., 2023). Such engagement can serve as a precursor to intergroup dialogue, where exposure to diverse perspectives in a structured environment may further deepen understanding of structural inequality and social identity (Zúñiga et al., 2016). Research with adult learners in higher education contexts similarly shows that dialogue-based learning fosters critical consciousness, empathy, and motivation for social justice action (O'Neill et al., 2024). The observed increase in students' willingness to challenge racial biases suggests an emerging readiness to take action in broader social contexts (Miller & Garran, 2017). Collectively, these results underscore the value of dialogic engagement in preparing social work students for anti-racist practice.

To contextualize these results, it is important to consider the sociopolitical climate of 2020–2021, marked by national traumatic events such as the murders of Breonna Taylor and George Floyd. Transformative Learning Theory posits that such events can serve as disorienting dilemmas, disruptive experiences that challenge existing beliefs and prompt critical self-reflection (Mezirow, 1997). In response to this collective trauma, faculty and educational institutions implemented targeted racial justice initiatives, including curricular changes and structured advocacy opportunities, to help students process and respond to these events. These multiple engagement points may have amplified the transformative potential of the moment, encouraging students to critically examine systemic racism, reassess their assumptions, and reframe personal and community grief into purposeful social action. As a result, students may have demonstrated greater confidence and

engagement in advocacy efforts aimed at advancing racial justice. To sustain the momentum of increased confidence and engagement in racial justice advocacy, social work education must more deliberately bridge the gap between short-term activation and long-term commitment.

Limitations

This study presents several methodological limitations that should be acknowledged. First, as a case study, the findings are not statistically generalizable but offer analytically rich, context-specific insights that can inform social work education more broadly. Next, the survey instruments used to assess students' engagement and confidence in racial justice advocacy were developed by the research team specifically for this study and have not undergone formal validation. Although these tools were conceptually grounded in established constructs from social work literature and tailored to align with the learning goals of the educational initiatives, the absence of established validity and reliability metrics limits the interpretability and generalizability of the findings. Additionally, the study employed a pretest-posttest design without a control or comparison group, which limits the ability to attribute observed changes directly to the intervention. The naturalistic context of a school-wide, real-time educational response to racial injustice offered valuable insight into perceived learning outcomes. However, without a control group, it is difficult to rule out alternative explanations for the observed changes, such as the influence of concurrent coursework, practicum experiences, or broader sociopolitical developments occurring during the same period.

Moreover, the study was conducted at a single private university with a specific institutional culture and student population, which constrains the transferability of the findings to other educational contexts. While the intent was not to generalize across all social work programs, the study aimed to generate context-specific insights into how online advocacy initiatives might advance and support student development during moments of collective trauma and societal crisis.

To strengthen future research, longitudinal designs that incorporate validated instruments, comparison groups, and multiple data collection points are recommended. Such methodological refinements would improve the capacity to assess causal relationships and explore the sustainability of students' advocacy engagement and professional identity development over time using advanced advocacy methods.

These limitations mirror challenges widely documented in educational research conducted during periods of rapid sociopolitical disruption. Scholars note that moments of collective trauma, such as the racial justice uprisings and the COVID-19 pandemic, require programs to prioritize responsiveness, feasibility, and student well-being, which can constrain the implementation of controlled research designs (Jun et al., 2021; Lerner & Kim, 2024; Weller et al., 2023). Acknowledging this context situates our study within the realities of conducting research during crisis-oriented transitions and underscores the need for future work conducted under more stable conditions.

Implications

The study has important implications for social work education, policy, practice, and future research. Regarding education, the results suggest that incorporating various modalities through virtual advocacy initiatives into the implicit curricula may provide students with transformative learning experiences. The perceived increases in students' confidence and engagement suggest that these advocacy initiatives enhance and change their perceptions about racial justice issues. These virtual initiatives likely provided students with tools and spaces to reflect on and critically engage with systemic racism, leading to an increased sense of confidence in addressing racial injustices in their personal and professional lives. Virtual tools, including social media, offer social work students' meaningful opportunities to practice advocacy and develop macro-level competencies in real time (Hitchcock & Young, 2016). Moreover, the findings imply that integrating classroom-based anti-racist work, such as decolonizing syllabi and offering university-wide DEIB workshops, alongside virtual advocacy initiatives may deepen students' understanding of social justice issues. By embedding these educational components, social work programs can promote the integration of clinical and macro practice, reinforcing the profession's commitment to equity. Furthermore, this aligns with recent calls to revitalize macro-level advocacy training in undergraduate programs to address students' expressed desire for more opportunities to build concrete advocacy skills (Golden, 2024). This holistic approach aligns with Transformational Learning Theory by emphasizing active engagement and critical reflection, enabling students to apply advocacy skills in real-world settings.

At the policy level, the results suggest the need for social work programs and institutions to formalize and sustain support for student-led advocacy efforts. Schools of social work should consider developing credit-bearing advocacy opportunities, securing funding for related projects, and establishing formal partnerships with community-based organizations. These steps can help institutionalize advocacy as a core professional expectation and educational outcome. Such policies can also address the gap between short-term confidence and long-term commitment by embedding advocacy within program structures rather than treating it as an extracurricular add-on. Institutional policies that support mentorship, group facilitation training, and collaborative learning will enhance students' capacity to remain engaged in advocacy efforts beyond the academic setting.

At the practice level, virtual advocacy for social justice should serve as a bridge between macro-level concerns and direct practice, providing students with experiential opportunities to engage in systems-level change while grounded in their emerging professional identities. Integrating macro-oriented experiences into social work education reinforces the role of the practitioner as both a clinician and an advocate. Encouraging students to participate in structured advocacy during their training may help them see themselves as active rather than reactive participants in movements for racial and social justice. Practicing within this framework prepares students to carry advocacy skills into agency, policy, and community-based roles, supporting the profession's broader mandate to advance human rights and challenge systemic oppression.

Finally, the study underscores a need for continued research into how advocacy education, particularly when delivered in virtual or hybrid formats, shapes the professional development of social work students. Future studies should explore the long-term impacts of participating in virtual advocacy on students' sustained engagement in activism, their leadership trajectories, and the integration of macro practice into their careers. Longitudinal research could help identify which elements of these advocacy experiences most effectively support enduring social work leadership and community engagement. Additionally, examining the impact of different advocacy modalities on diverse student populations could yield insights into equity-centered improvements in social work pedagogy and practice.

Conclusion

This study demonstrates the positive and nuanced effects of virtual advocacy initiatives on students' racial justice advocacy. While many students entered with strong commitments to social justice, participating in these initiatives increased their perceived levels of confidence and strengthened their engagement in advocacy efforts. These findings highlight the importance of integrating multiple opportunities within the implicit curriculum to build students' confidence, sustain their commitment, and deepen their engagement in advocacy. Moreover, virtual formats can effectively support the development of these capacities when in-person opportunities are limited or unavailable. Given the continued expansion of online education in social work, there is a critical need to design high-quality virtual advocacy experiences that intentionally develop students' professional identities as advocates and increase their civic engagement. Embedding advocacy involvement into the curriculum may not only enrich students' immediate learning but also help develop a future workforce dedicated to confronting and dismantling racial injustices.

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Acknowledgements: The authors wish to thank Ashley Butler and Darlene Brandow for their invaluable contributions as graduate assistants on the Social Action Committee. Additionally, we extend gratitude to our former Dean, Manoj Pardasani, for his support of these initiatives. Their collective efforts made this initiative and its evaluation possible.

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