

Distance Education and *Koinonia* in Sociology and Social Work at Faith-based and Secular Colleges and Universities: A Review of Literature

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Abstract

This article tackles questions of the significance of the Christian concept of *koinonia* for distance or online education in the fields of sociology and social work. After delving into the theological concept of *koinonia*, its definition and major aspects, it then describes the current state of online education, including its strengths and weaknesses, with a focus on sociology and social work. Third, the role of sense of community in online education and the role of the Community of Inquiry (CoI) model (Garrison, Anderson, and Archer 2000) are discussed, followed, fourth, by an illustration of what is known about online education at both secular and faith-based colleges and universities. The article then connects *koinonia* to the CoI model, and concludes by discussing implications for online education in sociology and social work not only at faith-based, but also at secular schools.

Keywords: *Koinonia*, community, sociology, social work, distance education, online education, faith-based colleges and universities, secular colleges and universities

What is the significance of the concept of *koinonia* for distance or online education in the fields of sociology and social work? A review of literature did not yield any research that discussed outcomes of online sociology or social work education at both faith-based and secular colleges and universities, nor did it reveal research that connects the concept of *koinonia* specifically to distance learning in these fields. This absence of relevant literature is curious, because the outcomes of online or distance education have been discussed comparatively between faith-based and secular schools in fields other than sociology or social work (e.g., Rovai and Baker 2004; Rovai, Baker, and Cox 2008). This article addresses this gap.

This article first delves into the theological concept of *koinonia*, its definition and major aspects. It then describes the current state of online education in sociology and social work, and discusses the strengths and weaknesses of online education more broadly. Third, the role of a sense of community in online education and the role of the Community of Inquiry (CoI) model (Garrison, Anderson, and Archer 2000) are discussed, followed, fourth, by an illustration of what is known about online education at both secular and faith-based colleges and universities. In conclusion, the article outlines implications for online sociology and social work education at faith-based as well as secular schools.

The Concept of Koinonia

Koinonia is the Greek word for the Christian idea of community and fellowship (Barreto 2015). As used in the Bible, it can mean “‘communion’, ‘fellowship’, ‘community’, ‘participation’, ‘mutual sharing’, ‘solidarity’, ‘communality,’ ‘society’,” and therefore is not easy to translate (Fuchs 2008:xxix). Based on his review of the literature surrounding this concept, Lorelei Fuchs (2008) concludes that in several New Testament books, such as the writings by the Apostles Paul, Luke, and John, it is a term with changing interpretations over time, both profane and religious. In its secular meaning, it was understood as a collaboration, such as in the realm of business, or as a marital union (Barclay 1964, as cited in Barreto 2015).

Fuchs (2008) analyzes the meaning of *koinonia* comparatively in the Gospels, the Book of Acts, and Paul’s writings. While the Gospel of Luke and the Book of Acts highlight the communitarian nature of *koinonia*, focusing on the fellowship of the Apostles, shared food, shared possessions, and faith unity (Fuchs 2008), in the writings of Paul, the trinitarian nature of *koinonia* is important, and “*koinonia*’s relationality points to the God whom Jesus reveals” (Fuchs 2008:13). However, this does not preclude the act of sharing described in the Book of Acts (Fuchs 2008).

Daniel Oprean’s (2021) discussion of *koinonia* is also based on his interpretation of writings by the Apostle Paul. He finds that Paul discusses the concept “as fellowship” as well as “participation, first at the vertical level, in and with Christ, and second, at the horizontal level, with one another as church, and as church in society” (Oprean 2021:132). The first aspect, “the communion (*koinonia*) with Jesus Christ” (Oprean 2021:133) is a life-long relationship with Christ and includes the believer’s taking part not only in Christ’s death, but also in his resurrection. The second aspect of *koinonia* entails what Oprean calls “fellowship with Christ in its horizontal dimension” (2021:134), implying an identification with other believers in the church community, the Eucharist being a prime example. The church community, however, is not focused mainly on itself, but also entails believers’ relationships with those outside the church. Thus, the concept of *koinonia* goes beyond just a community of interest of believers

and includes having the best interest in mind for all people, based on its grounding in relationship with Christ.

Koinonia is an important concept when it comes to sociology and social work in online or distance education, but surprisingly, it has not been discussed in connection to these topics. Any such discussion must be contextualized by the debate over online education more broadly.

Current Research on Online Education: Its Strengths and Weaknesses

Online education is a form of education that can take various formats, with the key characteristic that “the student and instructor are not in the same place” (Parsad and Lewis 2008: 1). It can be delivered using asynchronous formats, or can involve synchronous learning through Zoom or other technologies that allow interaction in real-time. It can also be achieved by other means, such as written communication, audio systems, or video transmission (Parsad and Lewis 2008). Hybrid (or blended) education differs from pure online learning, consisting of a mix between traditional classroom education and online learning (Lorenzetti 2004).

Online or distance education has become a prominent part of the educational system, including sociology and social work education in the United States and many other countries over the last few decades (Kurzman 2013; Moore et al. 2015; Siebert and Spaulding-Givens 2006). For example, according to the National Center for Education Statistics (2021) report from the Fall of 2020, three quarters of all U.S. undergraduate students took at minimum one of their courses in an online format. The percentage of students who studied completely online was 44%. Of course, some of this increase in numbers can be attributed to the pandemic (National Center for Education Statistics 2021), though participation in online learning had already increased steadily in the years prior to the pandemic (Kentnor 2015). Thus, distance education is now a part of many social work programs (e.g., Kurzman 2013; Moore et al. 2015; Siebert and Spaulding-Givens 2006) and sociology departments. For social work, Sharon Moore et al. (2015) report that in 2012, 22 MSW programs had an online option, though on the BSW level, there were only 5. In April 2022, however, the Council of Social Work Education (CSWE) listed 90 Bachelor and 169 Masters’ programs in social work that included an online option (Fulmer 2022). At the time of this writing, 98 Bachelor’s and 185 Master’s programs offer an online option besides the traditional, on campus option (CSWE 2023). While not much research exists on online education specifically in sociology, a report by the American Sociological Association describes the increase in online education in the field (Pike et al. 2017). More specifically, based on a survey of sociology departments from 2012-2013, Roberta Spalter-Roth, Nicole Van Vooren, and Michael Kisielewski report that “half of sociology departments (50.0%) offer at least one distance learning course in sociology” (2013:5). About 10% of sociology

departments also had created an online option for their students leading to a degree at that time. Presumably, these metrics have risen since 2013.

While online education has many advocates, it also has its critics. Deemed as an effective way of delivering education to a larger number of people (Parsad and Lewis 2008), online education is often seen as more equitable than traditional face-to-face education (Arasaratnam-Smith and Northcote 2017). But studies have also found online education to have limitations, such as lack of student engagement and sense of community (Jones 2015), or at times, insufficient connection to teachers (Noble and Russell 2013).

What are the identified strengths and weaknesses of online education not only in sociology and social work but also more broadly? As for the benefits, online education can reach a higher number of students because it is not place-bound, which makes this form of education an excellent option for students living in remote places from where travel to a college or university is hard to achieve (Jones 2015; Parsad and Lewis 2008). It is also said to level the playing field in education and give students from lower socio-economic backgrounds or those working full-time access to education, thus diminishing inequalities that can hinder access (Moore et al. 2015). It is also an excellent option for students who have young children or are otherwise caring for family members (Jones 2015). Colleges also use this form of education to boost enrollment and offer a broader variety of courses, and comply with students' wishes for flexibility (Parsad and Lewis 2008). However, Xiao (2021) cautions against viewing online education as more equitable than traditional face-to-face education in all circumstances and argues that inequities have to be consciously addressed.

Several studies have shown that online education is generally as effective as traditional face-to-face instruction. For example, one meta-analysis of more than 200 studies found that while it was not possible to decide which form of education was more effective overall, the findings on the influence of traditional and online education on student achievement were varied, and the same was true for retention and satisfaction with courses (Bernard et al. 2004). Additional studies that focused explicitly on student learning and achievement discovered that traditional classroom education did not produce better results than online education, or vice versa (e.g., Cummings, Chaffin, and Cockerham 2015; Forgey and Ortega-Williams 2016).

However, the variability mentioned by Bernard et al. (2004) becomes visible when comparing a couple of studies specifically in social work. One study found differences neither in scores on a comprehensive exam nor in self-efficacy ratings between students in the face-to-face and the online MSW program at the University of Tennessee College of Social Work (Cummings, Chaffin, and Cockerham 2015). But differences existed in other areas. While students in the online track received higher field competency ratings, the grade point averages

of traditional classroom program students in the advanced standing track were significantly higher than those of the online students in the same track. In another study (Wilke and Vinton 2006), the findings were reversed, as the students in a traditional, face-to-face program scored higher on field competency ratings than their online counterparts. This study also found no differences in grade point average between the two groups of students in an advanced-standing MSW program at Florida State University (Wilke and Vinton 2006).

Despite the similarity in achievement in online and face-to-face education, critics of online education point out what they consider to be its weaknesses, including lack of student engagement and cohesion or a sense of community among students (Jones 2015), a sense of lacking a connection to their instructors for some students (Noble and Russell 2013), as well as high attrition rates (Dueber and Misanchuk 2001). In one study, Sally Jones found that

The quality of the discussions, as in face-to-face courses, is dependent on the quality of the prompts, students' abilities and investment, and the facilitation that guides and deepens the dialogue. In addition, students being in online courses with their cohort enhanced cohesion and group interaction since they have most of their courses together. (2015:230)

However, Jones (2015) also noticed that despite the overall good quality of discussions in her online courses, asynchronous, online interaction lacked the spontaneity of discussions in the traditional campus classroom. This raises the question of community and engagement in online education.

The Role of a Sense of Community in Online Education

David McMillan and David Chavis (1986:9) describe a "sense of community" as a sense that one belongs and is important to the group. There is also an expectation that the resources in the group will contribute to helping members take care of their needs. At the same time, a "shared emotional connection" exists between group members, which extends to spaces, history, and activities.

Students' sense of community has received some attention in the literature on online education. One earlier study measured the sense of community among a group of online students at a midwestern university in an educational technology MA program via an analysis of their interactions online, and found only a weak sense of community among the students. The authors also caution that what could be seen as a sense of community could not be "indicating community so much as polite conversation" (Dueber and Misanchuk 2001:16).

The sense of community students feel in their classes is related to students' satisfaction with and success in online education in several studies. For example, students' perception of their learning in combination with their sense of community correlates with students' grades in one study (Rockinson-Szapkiw et al. 2016), and a sense of community is linked to the perception of how much they learned in another (Trespalacios and Perkins 2016). The degree to which students feel that they belong has also been found to influence student satisfaction (Exter et al. 2009), as well as attrition rates (Dueber and Misanchuk 2001).

What can be done to improve a sense of community in online courses? Jo Shackelford and Marge Maxwell (2012) found that interactions among students with specific goals, such as students introducing themselves to each other, working in groups on specific projects, sharing experiences, having online discussions with each other, and making each other aware of resources, contributed to students' sense of community in an online environment. Jones (2015) found that adding a synchronous online session once a week helped generate face-to-face interaction between students in her online social work classes. Others have also discovered that interactive exercises and interaction in general in an online course contributed to learning (Goldingay 2014; Stepich and Ertmer 2003), or that students really desired a connection to their professors (Noble and Russell 2013) and did better when communication and feedback was directly addressed to each student (Glazier 2016). Simon Stephenson (2019), analyzing existing studies on this topic, found that there are specific aspects contributing to a sense of belonging among online students, such as creating a course structure which fosters an honest exchange between students, the importance of the instructor, "social presence," the sense that one shares the online space with others and that what one has to say is valued, and the feeling that one is not alone, but part of a group. The latter can be fostered by creating small online groups instead of larger ones.

A sense of community is often tied to the Community of Inquiry (CoI) model, which facilitates understanding and evaluating how online education can be a successful experience for students (Garrison, Anderson, and Archer 2000; Garrison and Arbaugh 2007). In addition to the concept of "social presence" (sense of cohesion and communication, which can be connected most directly to a sense of community), this framework includes "cognitive presence" and "teaching presence." Randy Garrison, Terry Anderson, and Walter Archer define cognitive presence as "the extent to which the participants in any particular configuration of a community of inquiry are able to construct meaning through sustained communication" (2000:89). Teaching presence, on the other hand, includes the construction of a course as well as the actual teaching, and is described as "a means to an end -to support and enhance social and cognitive presence for the purpose of realizing educational outcomes" (Garrison, Anderson, and Archer 2000:90).

All three constructs are deemed to complement each other and have been studied in relation to academic achievement and other outcomes in distance education courses. For example, cognitive presence has been linked to students' perceptions of learning and achievement (Akyol and Garrison 2011). Additional studies found engagement in online courses and satisfaction with them linked to social presence and/or teaching presence (Walji et al. 2016; Dennen 2007; Dennen et al. 2007). In their summary of existing studies on the Community of Inquiry (Col) model, Randy Garrison and Ben Arbaugh (2007) highlight the importance of this framework, but also note the lack of work that considers social presence, cognitive presence, and teaching presence in the same study. All three aspects of presence relate back to the idea of koinonia.

Koinonia in Online Education at Faith-based Versus Secular Universities

Not much research addresses the outcomes of and satisfaction with online education at secular compared to faith-based colleges and universities, and the studies that exist focus mainly on the aspect of community or social presence, tending to neglect the additional dimensions of the Community of Inquiry (Col) model.¹ One study compared students in online courses and traditional face-to-face courses at a secular university and a Christian college in the state of Virginia, and found that students in the traditional classroom scored higher on the Sense of Classroom Community Index (SCCI) than students in online courses at both universities (Rovai and Baker 2004). In addition, students at the faith-based college scored higher than the students at the secular university in both the online and traditional courses, and this was the case at the beginning as well as at the end of a course.

A later study (Rovai, Baker, and Cox 2008) focused on graduate students in education at both a Christian and secular university. It found, first, that students at the Christian school rated themselves higher on the "social community" as well as the "learning community subscales" of the Classroom and School Community Inventory (CSCI)² than students at the secular university. Second, the students who took part in face-to-face classroom learning rated themselves higher on the social community (but not the learning community) subscale than the students who took the courses in the online modality and reported that they had learned more than their online counterparts. Why would this be the case? Alfred Rovai and Jason Baker (2004) tie their results to a discussion of the college atmosphere at faith-based colleges, arguing that community and

¹ That said, two dissertations applied the Col framework to Christian higher education, finding significant application of the model to this setting, though also some missing elements (Bartruff 2009; Judd 2015). However, these studies did not compare secular and faith-based schools with each other.

² As described in Rovai, Wighting and Lucking (2004), the learning community subscale emphasizes shared norms and expectations as they pertain to learning, whereas the social community subscale focuses on connectedness and community.

connection are emphasized on Christian college campuses more than at secular universities, due to the focus on mission at Christian schools. Thus, a college's broader cultural atmosphere has an influence on students, and this influence can also reach students in online classes. While students with a Christian faith can also attend secular universities, and vice versa, these findings are nevertheless important.

What is the relationship of these findings to the concept of *koinonia*? Alfred Rovai, Jason Baker, and William Cox (2008) note that Christian community (*koinonia*) is often missing in online education even at faith-based schools. They argue that feeling isolated is not conducive to learning, and, maybe most importantly, state that "the concept of learning exclusively in isolation runs counter to biblical themes" (Rovai, Baker, and Cox 2008:3). In their view, Christian education should include formation in the spiritual and moral realm and not just focus on knowledge acquisition. Consequently, they advocate for community-building in distance education programs at faith-based colleges (see also Shelton, Saltsman, and Bikis 2006).

Koinonia and the Community of Inquiry (Col) Model

Before drawing out implications for the relationship between *koinonia*, the fields of sociology and social work, and distance or online education at faith-based and secular universities, this section attempts an analysis of the overlap and differences between various aspects of successful online teaching discussed above, and most notably, aspects of the Community of Inquiry (Col) model, such as social presence, teaching presence, cognitive presence, and the concept of *koinonia*.

In the Community of Inquiry (Col) model, social presence includes communication and a sense of cohesion between students. Cognitive presence ties the course material to social presence, as it includes a "triggering event," and the elements of "exploration" and "integration" of academic material, and finally, a "resolution" (Garrison, Anderson, and Archer 2001:9). Teaching presence consists of the actual designing and teaching of a course (Garrison and Arbaugh 2007).

At the same time, key elements for the successful completion of online education at Christian colleges and universities have been discussed. These are "interaction with other students," "interaction with course content," and "interaction with faculty" (Shelton, Saltsman, and Bikis 2006:189-190), dimensions which map onto the three aspects of the Col model.

How then does *koinonia* relate to the Community of Inquiry (Col) model? The clearest connection between *koinonia* and the Col model can be made to social presence, or the sense of belonging to a community. While the Christian notion of *koinonia* and the secular concept of a sense of community are not exactly the same—*koinonia* goes beyond a sole sense of

community and implies real sharing and participation based on a relationship to the trinitarian God (Fuchs 2008)—similarities between the concepts exist and have been discussed in the literature (Rovai, Baker, and Cox 2008). The purpose of community among Christians is not to celebrate community amongst themselves, but to support those in need, and to go out into the world and teach others, as evident in the writings of Paul (Fuchs 2008; Oprean 2021).

While the sense of community resembles the horizontal element of *koinonia*, its vertical element can be understood as the relationship with the trinitarian God that gives the community its sense of purpose and mission (Oprean 2021). This vertical element of *koinonia* can be related to the teaching presence and/or the cognitive presence of the CoI model, however imperfectly. For example, we can link Jesus as the teacher of the Apostles, as discussed in the Synoptic Gospels, and the Bible as a foundational book for Christians to teaching presence. As depicted in the Gospels, Jesus teaches his disciples that he is the Christ, and at the same time, teaches them how to reach out to others (e.g., Luke 9). He does this both directly (e.g., through his teaching in the Sermon on the Mount) and indirectly (though setting an example, by healing many from various illnesses and ailments). The specific way the Apostles learned from Jesus can illustrate the concept of cognitive presence. It is easy to imagine that the Apostles would have gone through a cycle of learning that includes the elements of cognitive presence described above. An example of this process can be seen in Luke 24, when the disciples encounter Jesus while walking on the road to Emmaus, discussing his death (“triggering event” and “exploration”). While on the road, the disciples do not realize that it is Jesus who they are talking to. But only when he reveals himself to them later on do they realize that it was him whom they encountered, and how everything that happened to him was foretold in the scriptures (“integration” and “resolution”) (Garrison, Anderson, and Archer 2001:9).

Implications for Distance Education in Sociology and Social Work at Both Faith-based and Secular Universities

The broader research literature discussed above indicates that a focus on community is an essential part not only of traditional classroom education but also of successful online education. Online education’s success and students’ satisfaction with it hinges, in part, on the instructor’s ability to add activities to the course that connect students to each other (Goldingay 2014; Jones 2015; Stepich and Ertmer 2003). In addition, the culture of a specific institution matters beyond the way an instructor designs a course. Rovai and Baker (2004) highlight this, as they find that students at a faith-based college had a stronger sense of community also in their online classes than students at a secular college. They argue that students pick up on the ethos of a college and are possibly also influenced by the churches they attend outside of college.

Faith-based colleges and universities have long been described as having a strong mission highlighting a concern for the well-being of others and a focus on equipping their students to serve their community, region, nation, and the world, based on their Christian faith and perspective. They also concentrate on the integration of knowledge and learning with one's faith (e.g., Holmes 1987; Ream and Glanzer 2013). Influenced by a "grand narrative," their focus is on the "forming of whole persons—the physical, rational, spiritual, and emotional aspects of the self" (Ream and Glanzer 2013:2) as well as on teaching students to extend the love of God to the people around them in many diverse areas. These strong ideals inadvertently shape their students and likely influence online courses through their instructors, teaching content, and interactions with classmates (see also Shelton, Saltzman, and Bikis 2006). Thus, one could argue that compared to Christian schools, secular schools lack a holistic focus on the person with many different identities and roles (Ream and Glanzer 2013). Christian schools could have an advantage over secular ones when it comes to a sense of community even in their distance education programs because their faith background influences their mission (Rovai and Baker 2004). Christian colleges might also have an advantage because they are often smaller in size than secular schools (e.g., Lounsbury and DeNeui 1996).

At the same time, fostering a sense of community and community ethos is not unique to Christian colleges, as many secular colleges and universities also invest much in their students and actively work on creating an ethos of community and support. Many have a mission that focuses on serving their students, the community, the region, the country and even the world, and foster values such as inclusion, "public service," and critical thinking (e.g., Scott 2006:5; see also the mission statements of a few well-known secular schools, such as the University of Wisconsin-Madison, the University of Minnesota, Twin Cities, and MIT for just a few examples). What does this mean for online or distance social work education? In the next section, based on the evidence described above, this article draws out implications for the complicated relationship between *koinonia*, sociology and social work, and distance or online education at faith-based and secular universities.

First, for faith-based colleges and universities to create a sense of Christian community, the same principles apply to online education in sociology and social work as to other fields. Thus, the research findings highlighted above by Rovai and Baker (2004) and Rovai, Baker and Cox (2008) also apply to online sociology and social work education. Christian universities can be successful in their mission when having online programs, as long as they focus on "faith integration" in various areas, such as the communication students have with each other, consistent exchanges between teachers and students, and in the way the courses are structured (Shelton et al. 2006:186).

Second, Rovai, Baker, and Cox (2008) contend that the more schools can foster an ethos of community not only in their classes, but in their general campus culture, and also establish connections with the wider community, the higher the chances that students in online courses would also benefit from it. The authors propose specific strategies to connect distance education students to the campus community and culture. This can be done by the distribution of paraphernalia associated with the university logo, the organization of events that can be made accessible via mail or the internet, the fostering of connection with the faculty through online communication, and by having students come to campus for selected events (Rovai, Baker, and Cox 2008). The authors also mention connecting students to existing events where they live that are connected to the university (Rovai, Baker, and Cox 2008). Similar ideas can be applied to sociology and social work distance education, such as organizing events and speakers in the areas where the online option students reside. Some social work programs have also required in-person weekend courses for their online students, which is certainly another way to boost connection between students, and others have also found a way to combine face-to-face campus instruction with online aspects, that is, to implement a hybrid model (e.g., Ayala 2009) or foster personal interaction online (Goldingay 2014). In addition, Janet Haresnape, Fiona Aiken and Nirvana Wynn (2022) describe an evaluation of a workshop for online instructors in STEM fields from the Open University which allowed them to exchange ideas about what worked and didn't work well in their teaching. These forums contributed to a sense of connection as well, and could also be useful in sociology and social work.

Third, the literature discussed above (e.g., Rovai, Baker, and Cox 2008) suggests that a stronger sense of community among distance learners can be achieved by a college or university's clear community-oriented mission and vision, and by focusing on overall student well-being and on students as "whole persons" (Ream and Glanzer 2013:2). Students will pick up on the broader mission of a university through their professors and the readings and activities assigned to a course, which also extends to online courses (e.g. Shelton et al. 2006). While this happens at faith-based colleges, as discussed earlier, it does not necessarily have to be confined to them. Some contend that secular schools need to focus on more than just the intellectual aspects and professional training, and hone in more on holistic student formation and well-being, also because specific ethical issues (such as alcohol abuse, sexual abuse, and racist incidents) impinge on the educational experiences of students (Mintz 2014). Honing in on student formation and well-being overall is also important due to the mental health crises among college students we have witnessed in recent years (Porter 2018; Sheldon et al. 2021).

Sense of Community or Koinonia, Online Education, Sociology, and Social Work

Finally, this article explores whether the gap between faith-based and secular colleges and universities regarding students' sense of community in online courses would be less

pronounced in social work and sociology compared to other disciplines. Several writers have discussed the relationship between Christianity and social work and between Christianity and sociology, and understanding these relationships might illuminate the connection between sense of community, distance education, and social work and sociology also at secular schools.

Social work emphasizes serving others, connection and relationships, diversity, inclusion, empowerment, human rights, social justice, and “respecting the dignity and worth of each person” (NASW Code of Ethics 2021, Preamble; Ressler 1998), concepts which can also be found in Christianity. The focus on human relationships in social work further points to the importance of community, which is also highlighted in biblical texts such as in Galatians (Kasch 2019). Thus, even though it is now largely a secular field and profession, social work shares aspects with Christianity (e.g., see Ryan 1983), in part also because religious ideas influenced its mission (Midgley and Sanzenbach 1989). This is not to say that conflicts between social work and religious thought do not exist. For example, Lawrence Ressler (1998) points out a simplified distinction between the spiritual and the problem-ridden worldly realm, and a focus on eternal salvation while neglecting the principle of “self-determination” for the Christian social worker. However, for the purposes of this article, the similarities between social work and Christianity are more pertinent than the differences.

Some literature exists on the role of community in social work and its connection to biblical principles. However, the connection has not been made between community or koinonia and online social work education. Based on the above literature and insights, the social work mission could be a unique element contributing to a sense of unity and direction and possibly even koinonia among students. Social work’s mission arguably fits well with the concept of koinonia since social work has the ultimate goal of helping and supporting individuals, families, groups, and communities (NASW Code of Ethics 2021). That is, it focuses on the well-being of others beyond one’s immediate circle, as the emphasis on taking care of those outside of one’s close circle fits the “horizontal” aspect of koinonia. However, some differences between this understanding and the traditional Christian understanding of koinonia most likely remain, because at a secular college or university, the mission of the social work program is not grounded in a relationship to the trinitarian God, the “vertical dimension” of koinonia (Oprean 2021:132).

Likewise, many have discussed the sometimes contentious relationship between sociology and Christianity. The work by authors such as Monsma (2004, 2020), Chiareli (2019), Hiebert (2008), Heddendorf and Vos (2010), and Fraser and Campolo (1992) are but a few. For example, Scott Monsma (2004) depicts the tensions between sociology and Christianity, such as reductionism in sociology and the denial by some sociologists that their work is also influenced by values. But he also discusses what a critical integration might look like, including the

relationality of all humans made in God's likeness and how faith can act as a critical voice when it comes to conditions in society that need change. In addition, sociology can demonstrate that some aspects of Christian culture are also socially constructed. Other authors also focus on the relationship between faith and sociology. Antonio Chiareli (2019), for example, discusses how the Christian lens of creation, as well as the concepts of the fall and redemption bring together the three distinct sociological paradigms. Dennis Hiebert (2008) gives an overview of how different types of sociologies established by Michael Burawoy (2005)—professional, critical, public, and policy sociology—intersect with the Christian faith, and specifically highlights the role of critical and public sociology. For example, what unites Christian thought and public sociology is a “concern for the absence of community in contemporary life” (Hiebert 2008:9).

Thus, while sociology has a stronger theoretical and less applied focus than social work, some work in sociology also tackles the role of relationships and community, social justice, and personhood and human dignity (Bellah et al. 2007; Putnam 2000; Romero 2020; Smith 2011). Mary Romero, for example, directly illustrates that “tension exists between value-free science and scholar-activism in the discipline” (2020:19), tracing its origin back to sociology's early days. The focus on social justice and relationships in sociology can translate into a stronger sense of purpose and community among its students. As with social work, however, it is easier to make a connection between sociology at secular schools and the horizontal aspect of koinonia than its “vertical dimension” (Oprean 2021:132).

In conclusion, the sense of community and connected satisfaction with online courses in sociology and social work programs might not differ as much between faith-based and secular schools as in other disciplines. This possibly pertains even more to social work with its applied focus than to sociology. But since these relationships have not been empirically tested, further research is needed to compare the sense of community and belonging in face-to-face and distance learning in social work and sociology programs at both secular and faith-based colleges and universities, preferably by connecting it to the Community of Inquiry model and the Christian concept of koinonia, especially in faith-based schools.

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