



## Cohort Effect

 Altman, J.C. & Cohen, C.S. (2016). "I could not have made it without them": Examining trainee cohort perspectives on MSW education for public child welfare. *Journal of Public Child Welfare*, 1–18.

### WHAT IS THIS RESOURCE?

This article reports findings from an evaluation of a university-based child welfare training program focused on increasing the retention of knowledgeable, competent, and experienced child protective service workers. Students across three cohorts reported three critical elements were essential in their trajectory through the program and continued professional success.

### WHAT ARE THE CRITICAL FINDINGS?

Three critical elements emerged as essential to student's success in completing the program with such positive outcomes.

1. **Money** – Full scholarships made it possible to go back to school for their MSW.
2. **Time** – Full-time nature of the program made it exceptionally intense, but a relatively short duration made completion more possible.
3. **Cohort Effect** – Across all three cohorts, five distinct themes emerged that describe how students experienced their cohort-driven individual and collective success.

#### 5 Themes of Cohort Effect

Mutual support	Provided each other with counsel, encouragement, accountability, and camaraderie.
Empowerment	Cohort's sense of group solidarity led to broader feelings of empowerment as a social worker, such as growing consciousness around social justice issues.
Belief in self	Sense of hope that their goals were achievable promoted affirmation of their professional selves.
Finding home base	An inclusive environment where they felt safe to question, discover, and be patient with themselves as they grew professionally.
Launching their professional selves	Students developed themselves as professional social workers more easily because they had the supportive and safe environment of the group.

-  The cohort effect was most essential and salient to participants' success. Money and time were insufficient on their own.
-  The more constructive and engaged the climate of the learning cohort was perceived to be, the more deeply participants reported feeling its supporting effect of transformative learning.
-  Positive effects of the cohort continued into professional development and support post-graduation, strengthening their professional capacities and outcomes in the child welfare organization.

### WHAT ARE THE IMPLICATIONS FOR OUR WORK?

The evaluation highlights the role of the learning climate and culture, particularly the cohort effect to build relationships, in efforts to improve retention and reduce child welfare turnover. Students and trainees, especially those who are working full time while in school, face formidable challenges, and have the potential to be marginalized without special attention to their unique experiences. The cohort model may be extended to promote positive culture and climate change in other child welfare training settings.