



UNIVERSITY OF NORTH CAROLINA  
BEHAVIORAL HEALTH WORKFORCE  
RESEARCH CENTER

# **Diversifying the Behavioral Health Workforce: Supporting Students Earlier in the Educational Pathway**

**Addressing Health Workforce Shortages Now and in the Future**

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*October 11, 2023*

# Behavioral Health Workforce Research Center (BHWRC) at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill



Friday, Oct. 7, 2022



## UNC social workers to lead new Behavioral Health Workforce Research Center

Sheps Center-School of Social Work partnership will help decision-makers understand the needs of those who treat mental health and substance abuse.

- 5-year cooperative agreement jointly funded by SAMHSA and HRSA
- Must complete at least 8 projects on the BH workforce each year
- BHWRC is 1 of 9 federally-funded national workforce centers

Our mission is to improve the behavioral health and well-being of the U.S by doing research to strengthen this workforce through exploring disparities that perpetuate inequities in behavioral health treatment, access, and quality.

# Funding Disclosure

This project is supported by the Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA) and the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) under grant number U81HP46529-01-01 Cooperative Agreement for a Regional Center for Health Workforce Studies for \$1,121,875. This information or content and conclusions are those of the author and should not be construed as the official position or policy of, nor should any endorsements be inferred by SAMHSA, HRSA, HHS or the U.S. Government.

# Presentation Overview

## **Exploring the Pathway to Graduate Social Work Education**

- Diversity of the behavioral health workforce
- Overview of social work education and diversity among students
- Findings from a BHWRC Year 1 project using the National Survey of College Graduates
- Policy Implications

# Behavioral Health (BH) Workforce

- Addressing U.S. BH crisis requires understanding:
  - Who comprises the workforce?
  - What are pathways into BH professions?
  - What are the educational barriers for BH?
  - What are strategies to retain and sustain the BH workforce?
- Concerted efforts to diversify the health workforce to provide culturally and linguistically responsive care to diverse communities, including BH; A diverse BH workforce can improve health outcomes stemming from concordant care.
- Patients from diverse racial and ethnic backgrounds seek BH care less than half as often as their White counterparts, and often receive their mental healthcare from a NH White provider (Covino, 2019)

	% of U.S. Behavioral Health Professions by Race			
Health Profession Type	Hispanic	Black	Asian	White
Psychologists	7.9%	5.4%	4.4%	82.2%
Social Workers	12.0%	20.2%	3.6%	64.1%
Licensed Marriage and Family Therapists / Licensed Practical Counselors	11.9%	14.6%	3.1%	70.4%
Psychiatrists (Physicians)*	5.8%	4.4%	0.2%	-
Racial Distribution Percentages, U.S. Census (2020)	16.8%	12.4%	6.0%	61.6%

Source: Fitzhugh Mullan Institute for Health Workforce Equity. Health Workforce Diversity Tracker. Washington, DC: George Washington University, 2023. <https://www.gwhwi.org/diversitytracker.html>

\*Source of racial data (psychiatric physicians): Wyse, R., Hwang, WT., Ahmed, A.A. et al. Diversity by Race, Ethnicity, and Sex within the US Psychiatry Physician Workforce. *Acad Psychiatry*, 44, 523–530 (2020). DOI: 10.1007/s40596-020-01276-z



# Social Work Behavioral Health Pathway

- Social workers represent one of the largest groups of BH providers in the U.S. today with expected 12% job growth by 2030 (BLS, 2021).
- One pathway into the social work profession is defined as progressing from a BSW to MSW degree (CSWE, 2018).
- MSW program enrollment has increased nearly 17% over the last 10 years and degree conferrals has increased 18% over the last 10 years (CSWE, 2021)
- Recent stats on the social work workforce:
  - In 2019-2020, >50% of those who graduated with a BSW degree were from a diverse racial or ethnic background vs. 52% of the 31,750 MSW graduates identified as white and 18% were earned by Black/African American graduates (CSWE, 2021).

# BSW to MSW Pathway

- Four-years post-graduation, nearly 50% of students identifying as Black owed an average of 12.5% more than they borrowed, whereas 80% of students identifying as White owed 12% less than they borrowed (Hanson, 2023).
- Average loan-debt amount associated with pursuit of social work education increased from \$32,198 in 2010 to \$47,965 in 2020 (CSWE, 2021).
  - Median annual salary for health care social workers was \$60,840 in 2020
  - Median annual salary for mental health and substance abuse social workers was \$49,130 in 2020 (BLS, 2021).
- Other educational experiences to consider:
  - Community college attendance and associates degree
  - Type of institution (public, private, research intensive)
  - Life course and age and stage of educational experiences



# Research Questions

(1) Are students of minoritized racial/ethnic identities less likely to transition from BSW to MSW education?

(2) To what extent are education characteristics (i.e., undergraduate loan amounts, type of institution, community college attendance, obtaining an associate degree) associated with the odds of obtaining an MSW degree following a BSW degree?

(3) Are associations between education characteristics and the odds of obtaining an MSW degree moderated by racial/ethnic identity?

# Data Source

This study leverages data from the 2019 National Survey of College Graduates (NSCG).

The 2019 NSCG is a representative survey of non-institutionalized individuals residing in the U.S. States who earned a bachelor's degree or higher by 2018.

# Sample

**N = 538** participants representing a population of 635,233 individuals who either possessed a BSW as their highest degree (n = 323) or possessed both BSW and MSW degrees (n = 215).

## **Demographics** (weighted):

- 87% female
- 60% non-Hispanic [NH] white
- 21% NH Black
- 14% Hispanic
- 2% NH Asian
- 2% NH multiracial
- 1% NH American Indian/Alaskan Native

## **Education Characteristics** (weighted):

- 48% had \$10,000+ in undergraduate loans
- 68% attended a *public* undergraduate institution
- 57% ever attended community college
- 35% obtained an associates degree

# Methods

## Analysis Plan:

- Descriptive analysis of study variables by degree status (BSW only, BSW and MSW)
- Logistic regression to assess associations between the odds of obtaining an MSW degree following a BSW degree and the following correlates:
  - Racial/ethnic identity
  - Undergraduate loan amount
  - Public versus private undergraduate institution
  - Attendance at community college
  - Receipt of an associate's degree
- Tested interactions between racial/ethnic identity and other substantive variables
- Covariates: Year BSW was awarded, location of birth (U.S. versus otherwise), gender
- Use of sampling weights to derive representative parameter estimates

# Findings

**BSW Only**  
 Sample  $n = 323$   
 Subpopulation = 470,764<sup>a</sup>

**BSW to MSW**  
 Sample  $n = 215$   
 Subpopulation = 164,459<sup>b</sup>

Variable	Weighted Proportion
<b>Racial/Ethnic Identity</b>	
NH Asian	0.02
NH American Indian/Alaska Native	0.01
NH Black	0.22
Hispanic	0.15
NH White	0.58
NH Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0.00
NH Multiple Race	0.03

Variable	Weighted Proportion
<b>Racial/Ethnic Identity</b>	
NH Asian	0.03
NH American Indian/Alaska Native	0.01
NH Black	0.17
Hispanic	0.10
NH White	0.68
NH Native Hawaiian/Pacific Islander	0.00
NH Multiple Race	0.01

Note: <sup>a</sup>Estimated subpopulation count of U.S. residents under the age of 76 (as of February 2019) with BSW as their highest degree (by January 2019). <sup>b</sup>Estimated subpopulation count, as of 2019, of U.S. residents under the age of 76 (as of February 2019) with MSW as their highest degree who also have a BSW (by January 2018)

# Findings

- Key findings from logistic regression models pertained to interaction effects, rather than main effects.
- Indeed, the model yielded marginally significant interactions between racial/ethnic identity and (a) undergraduate loan amount and (b) attendance at community college.
- Increases in undergraduate loan amount were associated with:
  - Increased probability of obtaining an MSW degree following a BSW degree among NH White individuals
  - Decreased probability among NH Black individuals.

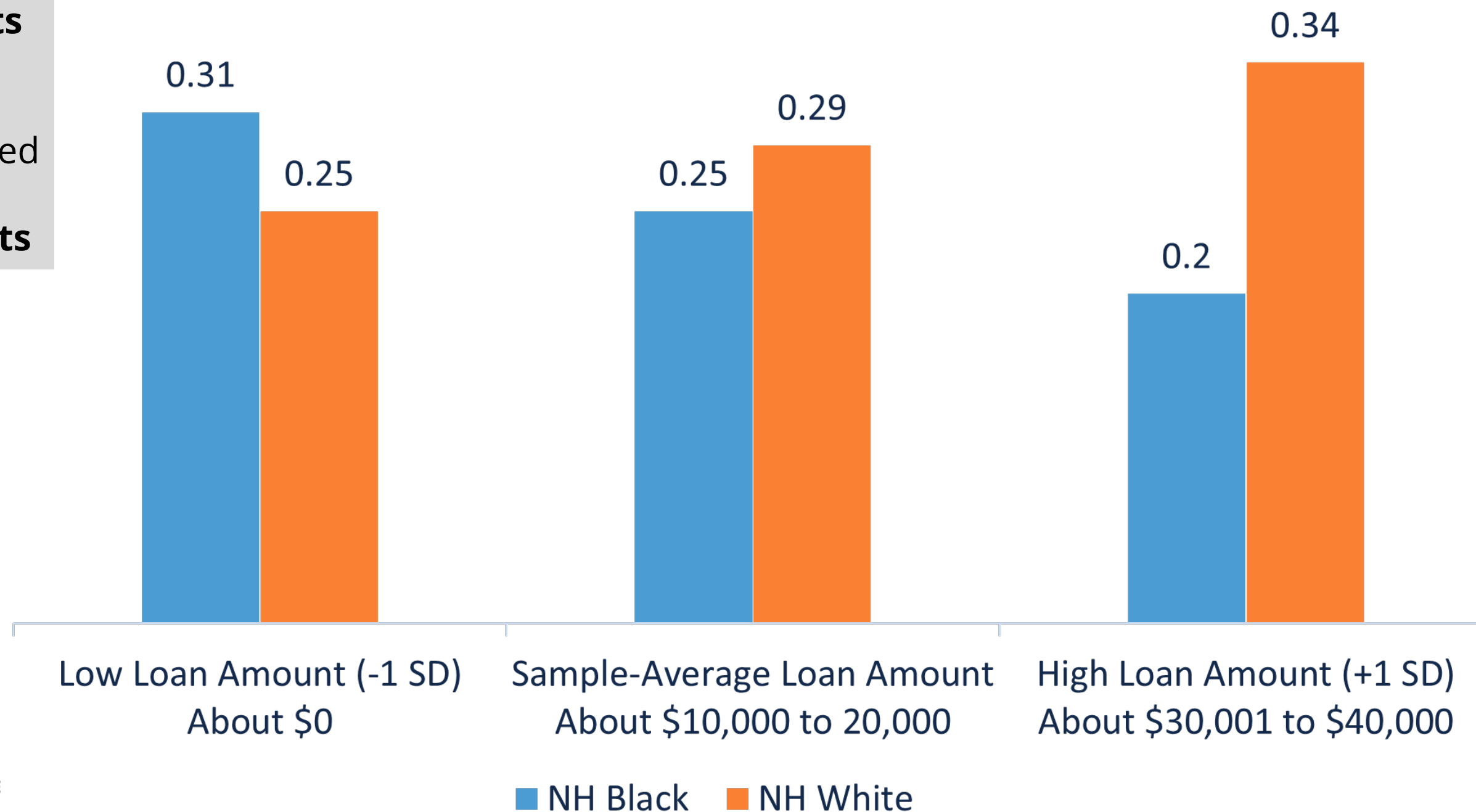


# Findings

## Predicted Probability of Obtaining MSW following BSW

*\*all other variables held at sample-mean levels*

Context: **83% of NH Black respondents** had some amount of undergraduate loan debt, compared to only **54% of NH White respondents**

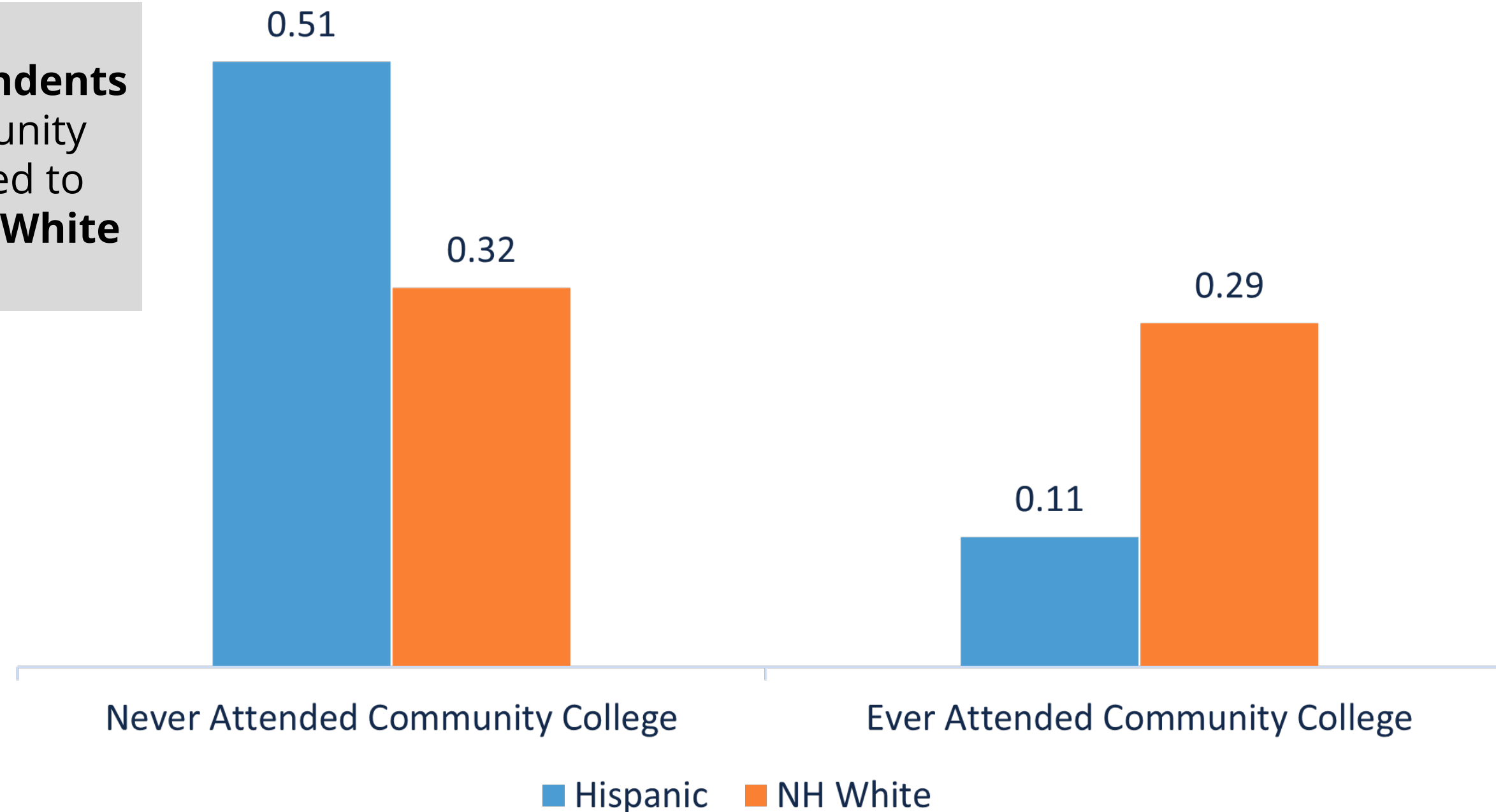


# Findings

## Predicted Probability of Obtaining MSW following BSW

*\*all other variables held at sample-mean levels*

**Context: 82% of Hispanic respondents** attended community college, compared to only **46% of NH White respondents**



# Discussion & Policy Implications

- Findings demonstrate how the combination of race/ethnicity and education characteristics can impact educational trajectories into the social work profession.
- Not only can high amounts of undergraduate loans reduce the probability that NH Black individuals with a BSW will obtain an MSW; a large majority of NH Black, Hispanic, and other racially minoritized individuals pursuing social work education are likely to incur undergraduate loan debt.
- The association between community college attendance and the probability of obtaining an MSW following a BSW differs based on racial/ethnic identity.
- When is it most beneficial to offer educational incentives and minimize student loan burdens to diversify the composition of social workers who might enter the behavioral health workforce?
  - Community college investment
  - Timing of loan forgiveness program may be too late in the pathway as it requires full MSW licensure
  - Considering other financial hardship/scholarships, waiver/stipend programs such as HRSA's BHWET mechanism
  - Holistic admission processes
  - Paying for practicum/internship clinical hours
  - Educational program to support and attract students pre-college into social work and BH profession

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# Questions/Comments?



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