
Racial and Ethnic Diversity in Undergraduate Social Work Programs: How are Programs in Rural Areas Faring?

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Abstract. *Social work programs have a long-standing commitment to recruiting and educating racially and ethnically diverse students. However, some programs in rural areas have greater difficulty meeting this commitment. This study examined racial and ethnic diversity within baccalaureate social work (BSW) programs, focusing primarily on student enrollment, faculty, perceptions of diversity, and interventions to attract students. Program directors of BSW programs from 10 Midwestern states were surveyed. Forty-two programs responded. The results indicate that as a whole, social work programs differ in their levels of racial and ethnic diversity. However, BSW programs in rural areas tend to have fewer students and fewer faculty who are racially or ethnically diverse. BSW program directors recognize lack of diversity as an issue, yet strategies that have been used to increase diversity have been only minimally effective. Implications for social work programs and strategies to enhance diversity are discussed.*

Keywords: racial and ethnic diversity, recruitment, rural, social work education, students

The United States is becoming an increasingly racially and ethnically diverse society. The populations in the United States that identify as Hispanic or Latino origin, as well as people who identify as Asian each grew by 43% between 2000 and 2010 (Humes, Jones, & Ramirez, 2011). A change in diversity is also taking place on college campuses. Enrollment rates among college-age Hispanics reached 15% of the overall enrollment of young adults in two- or four-year colleges in 2010, representing a new high for the share of college students (Fry, 2011).

Attracting racially and ethnically diverse college students has long been desirable for many academic disciplines on college campuses, including social work programs. A 1998 national opinion poll sponsored by the Ford Foundation's Campus Diversity Initiative (as cited in Smith & Schonfeld, 2000) reported that "over 90% of the public believe that diversity is important and that higher education has an important role in fostering it" (p. 17). Having a diverse student population helps to overcome historical oppression, enhance multicultural practice, and benefits student learning (Denson & Chang, 2009; Terenzini, Cabrera, Colbeck, Bjorklund, & Parente, 2001). Interactions with students who are racially and ethnically diverse can lead to greater understanding of how social problems affect diverse populations (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2009). Students of a different race or ethnicity can also bring a diverse way of thinking to classrooms (Chang, Denson, Saenz, & Misa, 2006). Thus, student diversity can enhance the campus experience in numerous ways.

For students who have grown up in a racially or ethnically homogenous community, a university may be one of the first places where they have a chance to interact with students different from themselves (Klomegah, 2006). Interacting with a racially or ethnically diverse student population leads one to question their own beliefs and value system (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2009) and could potentially aid the development of leadership skills that are valuable to post-college life (Jayakumar, 2008). Positive interactions with students who are racially or ethnically diverse as well as involvement in courses with diversity content can lead to greater social agency, increased critical thinking, and greater academic self-confidence (Nelson Laird, 2005). A diverse campus results in beneficial intellectual engagement and academic skills, as well as increased active thinking (Gurin, Dey, Hurtado, & Gurin, 2002).

There can be some negative aspects to lack of diversity on campuses. Racially and ethnically diverse students may struggle as a result of dealing with other burdens in addition to scholastic achievement (James, 1998). These burdens include issues such as discrimination, poor schools, and poverty. On predominantly white campuses, the underrepresentation of students who are racially or ethnically diverse can produce both negative social stigma (Fries-Britt & Turner, 2001) and stressors (Smedley, Myers, & Harrell, 1993) that negatively impact their academic performance.

Students who attend colleges that are more racially diverse tend to have fewer negative stereotypes about people of other races and they are less fearful in interracial settings (Hurtado, Milem, Clayton-Pedersen, & Allen, 1998); perspectives that are essential for social workers practicing in diverse environments. Greater diversity on campus also results in greater satisfaction with the college setting and increased self-esteem (Hurtado et al., 1998). Finally, increased racial and ethnic diversity can also benefit existing faculty who may experience an enhanced learning environment as well as personal growth (Maruyama, Moreno, Gudeman, & Marin, 2000).

Perhaps the most important factor is that promoting the education of students who are racially and ethnically diverse is significant to our society as a whole. Educating diverse populations means that our community leaders and our policy makers will be more racially and ethnically diverse (Klomegah, 2006). Furthermore, involvement with diverse populations in college can influence graduates as they become leaders beyond college (Luo & Jamieson-Drake, 2009).

The benefits of racial and ethnic diversity on college campuses extend beyond the student body. Faculty who are racially or ethnically diverse may experience less isolation when teaching on a campus where there is greater diversity among faculty and students (Antonio, 2003). University leaders understand that while culture, perception, and history make it difficult for colleges and universities to recruit and maintain faculty who are racially or ethnically diverse, it is important for students who represent similar diversity that efforts are made to expand diversity among faculty (Brunner, 2006).

As a profession, social work has long been committed to diversity in education. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) Commission on Accreditation has had a mandatory nondiscrimination standard for more than 50 years (Van Soest, 1995). As a whole, social work education does an adequate job of granting degrees to students from racially and ethnically backgrounds that have been historically underrepresented in higher education. In 2009, 37% of graduates at the baccalaureate social work (BSW) level were from historically underrepresented populations (CSWE, 2011), a number that mirrors the overall proportion of the population in the United States (Humes et al., 2011).

Clearly, social work programs should, and many do, foster environments that promote the education of students who are racially and ethnically diverse. Yet, some social work programs, especially those in rural areas, tend to lack racial and ethnic diversity among the student population. Research suggests that BSW programs can successfully retain students who are racially or ethnically diverse, once they are enrolled (Clark, Garza, & Hipple, 2003). While there is a sizeable historical literature on recruitment of racially and ethnically diverse students into the social work profession (e.g., Raber, Febb, & Berg-Weger, 1998), there is limited research in this area over the past few decades, despite the fact that schools still struggle with this issue.

Lack of racial and ethnic diversity poses two key challenges for social work programs. First, a lack of racial and ethnic diversity among the student population is inconsistent with the values of the social work profession. Second, social work programs are charged by the CSWE in accreditation standard 3.1.3 to have “specific plans to improve the learning environment to affirm and support persons with diverse identities” (CSWE, 2008, p.11). While racial and ethnic diversity represent only one aspect of diversity, it is an area where social workers can anticipate increased practice exposure.

One important element of the academic learning environment is the demographic make-up of the students, faculty, and staff in the social work program and on the campus at-large. As such, it is incumbent upon BSW programs to know their demographics, to have clear plans to increase racial and ethnic diversity, and to examine whether those plans are effective.

This research study was conducted as part of a self-study of a rural, Midwestern public university in preparation for reaffirmation of accreditation of their BSW program. The institution recognized that in order to better respond to the CSWE accreditation standard 3.1, it would be helpful to understand the learning environment of other BSW programs within the region and the strategies that those BSW programs used to recruit and support students who are racially or ethnically diverse on their campuses. The authors recognize that race and ethnicity represent only two aspects of diversity and difference with which social work programs should be concerned. The present study focuses explicitly on race and ethnicity primarily because these are areas of diversity where the university has struggled despite efforts to improve the learning environment specifically for faculty and students who are racially and ethnically diverse. The goal of the present study was to address this specific programmatic concern by exploring the experiences of other similar schools. The research questions guiding this study were:

1. Do BSW program directors believe their programs lack racial and ethnic diversity?
2. What relationship exists between geographic location and racial and ethnic diversity of students and instructors?
3. What interventions (if any) have the BSW program directors used in an effort to increase racial and ethnic diversity within their programs?

Literature Review

Increasing Diversity

There have been several suggestions on how to increase racial and ethnic diversity among students on college campuses in general and within social work programs in particular. However, the literature in this area is quite sparse with little attention to schools in rural settings. One strategy is to increase the proportion of faculty who are racially and ethnically diverse. The logic is that students who are racially or ethnically diverse may feel more comfortable in a social work program if there is greater diversity represented among the faculty members (Roberts & Smith, 2002). Similarly, faculty who are racially or ethnically diverse may also feel less isolated on campuses where there is greater diversity among faculty (Antonio, 2003).

In order to promote enrollment, one suggestion is to use alternative methods for admission to social work programs (James, 1998; Watson & Rycraft, 2010). Using strictly GPA's and standardized test scores may keep racially and ethnically diverse students out of social work programs. One strategy that has been shown effective is to provide an enhancement seminar to develop the basic skills and knowledge needed for success in a social work program (Watson & Rycraft, 2010).

Colleges and universities can also develop targeted programs that recruit and retain students who are ethnically and racially diverse (Clark et al., 2003; Misra & McMahon, 2006), although retention services may be underutilized if not sufficiently marketed (Clark et al., 2003). There is some evidence that colleges in rural areas can successfully recruit and retain faculty who are ethnically or racially diverse, with the appropriate supports (Shinnar & Williams, 2008). Faculty are an especially important recruitment and retention resource for first generation students who may struggle with the transition to college (McHatton, Zalaquett, & Cranson-Gingras, 2006).

Assistance with payment for the costs of college is another important consideration for students (McHatton et al., 2006). Financial aid can be an influential factor in determining college enrollment among African-American and Latino college students (St. John & Noell, 1989). As perceived costs of college rise, likelihood of enrolling in college decreases among African-American and Latino students (Perna, 2000). A related concern is that some parents and students may lack information about opportunities for financing college, which could ultimately delay any considerations of attending college (Zarate & Burciaga, 2010). Making available more institution-based financial aid, grants, and scholarships is helpful not only for attracting racially and ethnically diverse students, but also for retaining those students once they enter college (Seidman, 2005).

Methodology

The research design chosen for this study is a cross-sectional survey. The sample for this cross-sectional survey consists of BSW program directors at colleges and universities from a 10 state area in the upper Midwest part of the United States. Only schools that have a BSW program accredited by the CSWE were included in the study. Contact information for programs was obtained from the CSWE website, which has a list of every BSW program director's name and contact information. The survey was administered electronically using email and Survey-Monkey. Initial emails were sent out giving the BSW program directors two weeks to respond. Two follow up email requests were sent in that span to encourage responses.

Measures

The survey consisted of 14 questions. The questions focused on program demographics, perspectives of diversity in their programs, strategies used to increase enrollment of racially and ethnically diverse students, and the perceived effectiveness of those strategies.

Demographics. Eight questions focused on BSW program demographics. These included the state in which the institution resided, the type of institution, the social work degrees offered, the setting of the institution, the number of students in the BSW program, the number of full-time and part time-staff, and the ethnic and racial diversity of the social work students and faculty.

Diversity perspectives. BSW program directors were asked their perception of diversity within the program. If there was a perceived lack of diversity, the respondent was asked whether the lack of diversity was a problem, ranging from not at all a problem to a serious problem.

Strategies used to increase diversity. Several questions asked about specific interventions that the school might have used to attract students, such as financial aid, alternative methods for admissions (e.g., using methods other than GPA and test scores to admit students), and available academic support, such as tutoring sessions. Respondents were asked to identify which of these strategies their program utilized. The respondents were also asked to rate the effectiveness of the strategies using a five-item Likert scale ranging from 1 (*not at all effective*) to 5 (*extremely effective*).

Findings

A total of 123 BSW programs were surveyed. Forty responses contained valid data and were used for data analysis. The 40 programs represented three geographic areas: 12 (30.0%) identified themselves as rural, 15 (37.5%) identified themselves as urban, and 13 (32.5%) identified themselves as residing in a suburban area.

Racial and Ethnic Makeup of BSW Students

On average, programs reported that there were 121.2 students in their BSW program. Of those students, an average of 25.9 (23.5%) were identified as representing a racially or ethnically diverse population. The mean number of students, overall and by geographic region, is represented in Table 1. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to test for differences in the proportion of BSW students across the three geographic settings. The proportion of students differed significantly, $F(2, 36) = 8.11, p = .001$. Post-hoc comparisons of the three groups indicate that the rural setting, $M = 0.086, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.064, 0.108]$, had a significantly lower proportion of racially or ethnically diverse students as compared to the suburban setting, $M = 0.350, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.226, 0.473], p < .001$ or the urban setting, $M = 0.272, 95\% \text{ CI } [0.161, 0.384], p = .006$. Comparisons between the urban and suburban settings were not significantly different.

Table 1

Program Characteristics by Setting

Setting	Rural Institutions ($n = 12$)	Urban Institutions ($n = 15$)	Suburban Institutions ($n = 13$)
Student Characteristics			
Mean number of BSW students	110.8	135.4	99.1
Mean number of diverse BSW students*	9.3	33.3	32.8
Faculty Characteristics			
Mean number full-time BSW faculty	3.6	11.5	4.0
Mean number of full-time diverse BSW faculty*	0.4	3.6	0.9

* = $p < .05$ (F value)

Racial and Ethnic Makeup of BSW Faculty

Thirty-seven respondents reported data on faculty in their BSW programs. Thirty-five of those respondents also reported the number of faculty that represented a racially or ethnically diverse population. Overall, respondents posted an average of 6.71 full-time faculty in the BSW programs. Of those faculty, an average of 1.75 (20.5%) were identified as racially or ethnically diverse. A one-way analysis of variance (ANOVA) was used to test for differences in the proportion of full-time faculty across the three geographic settings. Among full-time faculty, the proportion of diverse faculty differed significantly by geographic setting, $F(2, 32) = 3.86, p = .032$. Post-hoc comparisons of the three groups indicate that the rural setting, $M = 0.108,$

95% CI [0.003, 0.214], had a significantly lower proportion of faculty identified as racially or ethnically diverse as compared to the BSW programs in an urban setting, $M = 0.312$, 95% CI [0.201, 0.423], $p = .012$. Differences among the suburban settings were not significant.

Interventions to Increase Diversity

Respondents were asked to identify what interventions were used to increase enrollment of racially or ethnically diverse students into their BSW programs. Thirty-six BSW program directors responded to this question (see Table 2). Overall, there were two strategies that were used by the majority of the schools surveyed. The most commonly endorsed strategy was additional academic support with 68.1% of schools reporting that they offered academic support as a way to increase racial and ethnic diversity in their BSW program. The second most common strategy was the provision of financial assistance, such as academic scholarships, with 55.9% of schools using this approach.

Table 2

Percentage of Interventions Used by Rural, Urban, and Suburban Institutions to Recruit and Retain Diverse Students

Interventions	Rural Institutions ($n = 10$)	Urban Institutions ($n = 13$)	Suburban Institutions ($n = 12$)
Offers financial scholarships	66.7	26.7	53.8
Offers financial aid	33.3	6.7	23.1
Offers additional academic assistance	58.3	40.0	61.5
Offers alternative admissions process	8.3	13.3	15.4

There were some differences in the use of strategies by geographic location of the schools. For rural institutions, the most popular interventions were scholarships for students (66.7%), followed by additional academic assistance (58.3%). All of the respondents from rural BSW programs indicated that they used at least one intervention to increase enrollment of racially or ethnically diverse students.

Urban schools used fewer interventions to recruit students. Respondents from urban institutions identified additional academic support as the most popular interventions (40%), followed by financial scholarships (26.7%). Interestingly, one-third of urban respondents stated that they did not use any strategies to recruit students who represent a racially or ethnically diverse population.

Respondents from suburban institutions listed additional academic support as the most popular intervention (61.5%), followed by additional scholarships (53.8%). A small number of suburban institutions (16.7%) reported that they did not use any interventions to increase enrollment of racially or ethnically diverse students in their BSW programs.

Respondents were asked to rate the effectiveness of their interventions. Rural institutions gave an average effectiveness rating of 2.73. In contrast, suburban schools gave an average effective rating of 3.40, with 50% of schools giving a rating of four or above. Urban schools that used strategies had an average effective rating of 3.70 with 60% of respondents giving a rating of four or above. A Mann-Whitney U test was conducted to evaluate whether the rural schools would score lower, on the average, than non-rural schools (urban and suburban combined) when comparing the effectiveness of their interventions. The results of the test were significant, $z = 2.07$, $p < .05$. Rural schools had an average rank of 11.64, while non-rural schools had an average rank of 18.40.

Programs that Lack Diversity

Finally, BSW program directors were asked their perception as to whether their program lacked racial or ethnic diversity. Thirty-eight BSW program directors responded to this question with 19 (50%) responding that their program did lack racial and ethnic diversity and the other half reporting that they did not believe their BSW program lacked diversity. Of those that stated they believed their program lacked diversity, three (15.8%) stated that it was a minor problem; 10 (52.6%) believed it was somewhat of a problem, and six (31.6%) reported it as a serious problem.

Those BSW programs that perceived a lack in racial and ethnic diversity differed in some significant ways from the programs that did not perceive a lack of diversity. First, the size of the program differed dramatically, as programs that did not believe they lacked diversity ($M = 89.5$) were significantly smaller, $t(36) = 2.76$, $p < .01$, than the programs that perceived a lack of diversity ($M = 152.6$). A second difference was the proportion of BSW students who represented a racially or ethnically diverse population. The proportion of students who were identified as racially or ethnically diverse was significantly higher in the programs that did not perceive a lack of diversity ($M = 32.12$) as compared to those schools that did perceive a lack of diversity ($M = 15.35$). A t -test confirmed the difference between the two groups, $t(36) = 2.88$, $p < .01$.

There was little difference between the two groups of programs in strategies used to enhance racial and ethnic diversity (see Table 3). The group of BSW programs that did not perceive a lack of racial or ethnic diversity more commonly used strategies to enhance diversity (e.g., 57.9% as compared to 42.1% offered scholarships), although the differences were not significant. However, the one difference that was significant is in the perceived effectiveness of the strategies that were used to enhance diversity. Programs that perceived a lack of diversity rated their strategies as less effective ($M = 2.75$) as compared to those programs that did not perceive a lack of effectiveness ($M = 3.75$), resulting in a significant difference, $t(30) = 3.16$, $p < .01$.

Table 3

Percentage Difference in Perception of Racial and Ethnic Diversity

Categories	Diverse (n = 19)	Not Diverse (n = 19)
Strategies to Enhance Diversity		
Offers financial scholarships	57.9	42.1
Offers financial aid	31.6	10.5
Offers additional academic assistance	63.2	47.4
Offers alternative admissions process	15.8	10.5
No interventions used	15.8	15.8

Discussion

There are several findings here that warrant further discussion. We will focus on the differences based upon rural setting, the perception of diversity among program directors, and success of interventions at increasing diversity. However, we would first like to acknowledge that there were some limitations to the design of the study. The response rate was somewhat low, with only one-third of contacted programs responding to the request for information. There were also some inconsistencies with the reported data from some of the cases, which required data to be excluded. Also, because the study utilized a survey methodology, there was limited ability to control for the accuracy of reported data. However, as the data was obtained from BSW program directors who have responsibility for reporting program statistics to CSWE, the data is expected to have strong reliability. Finally, the research focuses only on one aspect of diversity (structural), whereas other, potentially more meaningful types of diversity are not included here.

Perceptions of Diversity

One finding that deserves further discussion is the difference in perceptions of diversity among program directors. Half of the respondents indicated that their BSW program lacked the level of racial or ethnic diversity that they would like their program to have. The responses of those program directors were logical. Those programs that felt they lacked racial and ethnic diversity did have fewer diverse students, suggesting that programs are aware of their patterns of enrollment and that the program directors are thinking about how it reflects on their social work program. Interestingly, BSW programs that believed that they lacked diversity were nearly twice as large in number of students (152.58 to 89.47), yet they had similar numbers of students who are racially or ethnically diverse (26.37 to 25.40). This suggests that the size of

the BSW program may not matter in terms of building or increasing diversity in the program. Rather, it may be that the context of the college or university, as expressed through their commitment to diversity and potential as an academic institution, that leads to success of initiatives to increase racial and ethnic diversity on campus (Milem, Chang, & Antonio, 2005).

Rural Institutions

A second finding that is worthy of further discussion is the difference in diversity between rural and suburban or urban BSW programs. Programs that self-identified as rural had the least racial and ethnic diversity among their BSW students. BSW programs in rural areas were concerned about this lack of diversity, as they were more likely to state that it was a serious problem than schools in other geographic settings. While rural schools were more likely to use interventions to address the lack of diversity, the BSW directors from those schools gave their interventions a lower effectiveness rating than their urban and suburban counterparts.

Social work programs in rural areas also tended to have fewer faculty who are racially or ethnically diverse. One of the challenges in attracting students who are racially or ethnically diverse is that the students will sometimes look to the faculty for examples of the university's commitment to diversity (Smith, Turner, Osei-Kofi, & Richards, 2004). If faculty lack diversity, it can influence student decisions. BSW programs and students themselves recognize the role faculty can serve in supporting the retention of students who are racially or ethnically diverse (Clark et al., 2003). However, schools may have a difficult time attracting faculty who are racially or ethnically diverse if there is not a perception of commitment to diversity on the part of the institution as a whole.

To a significant degree, this is an issue that must be addressed institutionally (Antonio, 2003). BSW programs in rural areas will have difficulty attaining more diversity in their social work programs unless there is a concerted, sustained, multi-dimensional effort among the college as a whole to promote a culture of diversity within the student body, the staff, the administration, and the faculty (Chang, Milem, & Antonio, 2010). Furthermore, it isn't sufficient to only address compositional diversity through faculty on campus. In order to develop an environment committed to diversity, other aspects of diversity need to be fostered, such as curriculum content that reflects diverse perspectives, opportunities on campus for students to experience cultural diversity, and interaction among students.

One suggested strategy is to reach out to diverse populations that live within rural areas (Milem et al., 2005). While many rural communities remain predominantly white, this has been changing over the past decade as Hispanic populations have experienced dramatic growth in rural areas. Between 2000 and 2010, Hispanic residents in non-metro areas increased by 45% in the United States (Cromartie, 2011). Colleges and universities as a whole, but also social work programs in specific, need to reach out to these emerging populations and create an inviting environment on campus.

When BSW Directors were asked the qualitative question, "Why do you believe that your program lacks diversity?" nearly two-thirds of the respondents stated either that being in a

rural area or the current racial or ethnic composition of their university was the reason for the lack of diversity. The fact that many rural communities where rural institutions reside are historically racially and ethnically homogenous is no doubt a barrier that rural institutions have yet to effectively overcome. This only strengthens the argument for a concerted effort to reach out to those student populations (Milem et al., 2005).

Interventions

The most popular intervention for rural schools was scholarships for students who are racially or ethnically diverse. More than two-thirds of the respondents from rural areas reported that they incorporate this type of intervention. However, the effectiveness rating for rural schools was much lower than suburban and urban schools. For both of these institutions, additional academic support was the most popular form of intervention and overall, urban and suburban schools felt that their interventions were more effective at helping to promote more racial and ethnic diversity among their students.

Scholarships are commonly used, yet in this study they were not considered very effective. Interestingly, the research is not conclusive on this subject. Historically, availability of financial support, such as scholarships, has not been as influential in decisions to attend college as one might initially think (Hurtado, Inkelas, Briggs, & Rhee, 1997). In fact, financial resources were considered such a limited factor that early studies excluded finances from models predicting college success (Goldrick-Rab, Harris, & Trostel, 2009). From a human capital theory perspective, financial assistance should be a driving influence for students making rational choices about where to attend or what to study (DesJardins & Toutkoushian, 2005). However, recent research raises questions about the reasonableness of expecting students to be rational actors, as students and their families may not have complete information about all their options for study or how scholarships and other forms of financial assistance may ultimately benefit them (Dowd, 2008). What this means for social work programs is that they shouldn't expect to enhance racial and ethnic diversity solely through the use of financial assistance, but rather in combination with other programmatic and school-wide strategies that recognize other predictive factors that influence decisions to attend certain colleges or universities.

Areas for Further Research

While there are some specific lessons that social work programs can learn from this study, there are also some areas where additional work is still needed. First, this study focused on a specific geographic region of the United States. It is possible that the experiences of schools in the upper Midwest may not extend to other areas of the United States. Replicating the study in other regions would provide insight as to whether this is a localized issue or one that is shared throughout the country. Second, there are clearly additional questions that should be explored as to the effectiveness of interventions in increasing racial and ethnic diversity. In fact, there may be some opportunity to design more rigorous studies utilizing specific interventions to test the effectiveness of interventions.

Conclusion

The study identified that among social work programs in the upper Midwest, racial and ethnic diversity among students remains a concern. Programs that are located in rural areas tend to have fewer students and faculty who are racially or ethnically diverse. Furthermore, program directors recognize this lack of diversity as a problem. While programs do use an array of interventions to attempt to increase diversity, the effectiveness of those interventions is unclear. For programs that are interested in increasing racial and ethnic diversity among students, more strategic recruitment efforts should be considered both at the programmatic level as well as the university level.

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