


# Chapter 12

## Building From the Rubble: Launching a New Program Amid Institutional and Social Instability

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### **ABSTRACT**

*This chapter explores the creation of a Master of Social Work (MSW) program amid the dual crises of the COVID-19 pandemic and systemic instability in higher education. Set within a liberal arts institution in New York, between 2018 and 2022, the chapter examines how the development of this program facilitated both resilience and innovation during a period of significant uncertainty within higher education, such as institutional closures, rapid transition to remote instruction, and social upheaval. Simultaneously, the need for well-prepared social workers to respond to the crisis reached unprecedented levels. This chapter outlines how faculty and administrators worked to design a program that met rigorous academic and professional standards while also responding to the urgent needs of students and the surrounding community. This is one of the first studies to examine the creation of an MSW program in the United States during the COVID-19 pandemic and offers an example of how higher education can adapt through community engagement, social justice, and bold programmatic vision.*

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## INTRODUCTION

The landscape of higher education is undergoing unprecedented shifts and often disruptive changes. Institutional closures, program retrenchment, and institutional relocations have destabilized campuses and the communities that depend on them. These upheavals have generated a trail of untold stories—narratives of resilience, adaptation, and loss. This chapter tells one such story, exploring how disruption in higher education intersects with institutional and social change and the human impact of this transformation. These findings illustrate the complexities of navigating higher education in times of uncertainty and the role that innovation through program development can play in meeting emergent needs in one liberal arts institution, St. Joseph’s University of New York. This chapter will explore how higher education institutions can respond to crises through innovation, particularly by aligning new program development with community needs, social justice values, and liberal arts traditions. This work will offer a framework for program development in times of upheaval or institutional change.

This is a story about the paradox of creation amidst collapse at St. Joseph’s University of New York, a mid-size, private liberal arts institution in New York. In 2018, the institution began designing a Master of Social Work (MSW) program. Unbeknownst to the faculty and administrators involved in the program planning phase, the program’s development would largely unfold against the backdrop of the COVID-19 pandemic. This chapter examines the program’s design process when the campus was physically closed, faculty, staff, and students had transitioned online, and the surrounding community was devastated by the economic and social upheaval caused by the pandemic. Concurrently, the social work field was at the forefront of responding to the needs of at-risk communities nationwide, and the need for well-prepared social workers was at an unprecedented high. This work examines the resilience required to build something new while the foundations of the institution, community, and social work profession seem to shift beneath our feet. It is a story of navigating dual crises—a global pandemic and the systemic instability of higher education—to create a program that met academic, accreditation, and professional standards and addressed the unprecedented needs of students, the profession of social work, and the broader community.

The development of the MSW program at St. Joseph’s University of New York serves as both a response to and a buffer against institutional disruption. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the program’s inception reflected a proactive effort to address the growing local demand for qualified social work professionals, aligning with institutional goals to expand service-oriented education and strengthen the reciprocal relationship with the surrounding community. At the same time, the institution explored ways to reinvigorate its mission. During the pandemic, the

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