

Disaster Management Degree Through a Social Work Lens

December 13, 2022 11:00 AM



Max Brehm

Max Brehm knew he wanted to get into social work, but, like many people, his career path wasn't a straight line.

"I took a circuitous route in undergrad," begins Brehm. Over the course of 11 years, Brehm earned his undergraduate degree in anthropology from Metropolitan State University of Denver.

One of his classes at Metro was a trafficking course, run by the founder and the training head of a local anti-trafficking organization. The work, primarily research, looked into trafficking in Colorado and informed national context trends.

Taking this class and working at a facility for abused and neglected children in Denver, Brehm knew he wanted to work with people in adverse situations. "I want to

spend time and affect change within people's lives. I want to be there for them on the worst days of their lives."

His undergraduate mentors pushed him to continue his education after earning his degree. "They told me, 'You have to find a program that fits your passions.'"

While Brehm knew he wanted to find a social work program, he also wasn't sure specifically what program was the best fit for his goals.

"Working within child welfare and seeing the system, I knew that if I wanted to have more responsibility and change the system, I needed a Master's degree."

"I also knew I couldn't be a behavioral health technician and start a family," he candidly shared, explaining the difficult nature of direct care and its tendency to lead to burnout. "During Covid, we were there over 60 hours a week, in constant contact with the police."

"If you grow up in violence, that's your solution," he adds, empathizing with the kids he worked with. But it nonetheless left physical and emotional scars. "I did a lot of personal work in that period. How do I hope to make this system better? I can't do that with a bachelor's degree in anthropology."

Choosing the Right Disaster Management Program

While he was looking at programs, Brehm had several schools on his list, including a public health program on the East Coast and a dual JD/MSW program in his home state. "But I didn't want to read law and legislation," shares Brehm. "Even though I love it now." And he didn't want to end up working in labs. "I need that involvement with real people."

With the ever-changing global and social climate, Brehm knew there was opportunity to affect change within disaster management. "A hurricane in the middle of the ocean is not a disaster," he explains. "The one thing that makes a disaster a disaster is when a person or people are adversely affected by an occurrence."

That's when he found the Master of Social Work (MSW) and Master of Science in Disaster Resilience Leadership (DRL) dual degree program at Tulane University School of Social Work.

"This is not just a social work degree," Brehm explains, noting the Disaster Resilience Leadership portion of the program fits with his goal of wanting to hold space for people on the worst days of their lives.

Brehm notes there are other disaster management programs, but the difference is the DRL/MSW program "really looks at disaster management through a social work lens of 'let's try and understand all systems involved from micro to macro.'"

The program also focuses on more than simply disaster response and management. Instead, it takes a holistic approach to disasters, including mitigation, preparedness, and recovery. The more proactive versus solely reactive approach allows Tulane students to address the root causes of vulnerability.

The DRL/MSW dual degree program is available in-person at the Tulane campus in New Orleans, as well as online. One of the main draws for Brehm was the ability to earn his degree while working within his community.

"I can do this from my dining room table, but I can also do internships within the Denver metro area," says Brehm, reflecting on choosing the DRL/MSW program. "I was born and raised here and I knew I was going to come back here. I'm able to build connections through my internship now."

As Brehm explains, the online aspect of the program still allows you to make connections with your peers. "If you want to be social and you want to dork out with your peers [you can do that]. You navigate it differently, but as time goes on with the world we live in, it's not hard." He mentions two MSW students who live on opposite sides of the country and have become close friends.

What Can You Do with a Dual DRL/MSW Degree?

With graduation approaching, Brehm has a few ideas for where he wants to work next, including emergency management and public safety for organizations like the Denver Police Department. But he's leaning into keeping his options open.

“So much has changed,” Brehm says of his experience so far. “Through my process of life and doing this program later, I was able to have an open mind coming in.”

Whereas he thought he was going to work with abused children for the rest of his life, Brehm says his real-life experiences allowed him to see other paths.

He recommends the same to others looking to get into this work. “To be successful with this, you need to have those experiences,” he advises. “It also helps to be open minded and have a willingness to change. Trust in the process.”

One of the things Brehm has learned from the Disaster Resilience Leadership program is that organizations are typically great at response, but are lacking in recovery, preparedness, and mitigation. That’s one of the areas he feels he can make a difference.

As climate change continues to wreak havoc on people’s lives—and the severity of these disasters only increases—Brehm stresses the need to evolve policies. “We can’t run these programs off data from 10 years ago,” he says, referring to dated disaster response processes.

“We’re wasting not just monetary resources, but individual capital and community capital. If we could mitigate and prepare, we’d save money, but we’d also save so much more.”