



Sowing the Seeds of Knowledge

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- Quality doctoral education needed to advance social work research
- Social work PhDs share their impact and reflect on their doctoral education

By Brenda Murphy-Niederkorn

PROFESSOR SHANTI KHINDUKA has pointed out the “striking continuity” in concerns about the quality and quantity of doctoral education over a long history in the United States. Demand for well-trained PhDs in social work is hot, but the number of applicants has not increased and the number of doctoral student openings in research universities has remained relatively flat in recent years. The result: fierce competition for the best applicants and graduates.

Wendy Auslander, chair of the Brown School’s doctoral program, argues that the focus should first be on the quality of students not necessarily the quantity.

“Strong doctoral programs are at the heart of building the social work knowledge base,” said

Auslander. “Collectively, schools of social work need to create greater interest in doctoral education, while also being more selective as to who is admitted to these programs.”

Achieving excellence in doctoral education, however, requires a significant commitment from an institution. The following are Auslander’s comments on a few key factors that she believes contribute to shaping the quality of doctoral education.

INTERDISCIPLINARY COLLABORATION: “Solutions to society’s most critical challenges rely on collaboration among many disciplines; multiple viewpoints need to be brought to the table. Universities must create opportunities for doctoral students to engage in a flow of ideas between and among members of many disciplines.”

STRONG FACULTY: “The quality of an institution’s faculty goes hand in hand with the quality of its doctoral program. Faculty who are conducting innovative research and produce sound scholarship will help attract new students to the program and, of course, play a lead role in ensuring that an institution’s culture supports doctoral education.

INSTITUTIONAL CULTURE: “The characteristics of a school’s culture — which can range from its history to its administrative structure — impact its ability to foster intellectual inquiry among doctoral students, mentor these students, and support the sometimes competing but equally important demands of teaching and research. It is imperative to understand how cultural factors impact the recruitment and retention of doctoral students.”



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Wendy Auslander, professor, George Warren Brown School of Social Work



FINANCIAL SUPPORT: "We need to be realistic about the financial investment schools and their students make in their degrees. It takes a long-term commitment from a school to ensure that it has the resources required to support the needs of students through the duration of the time in a PhD program."

POST-DOCTORAL TRAINING: "Post-doctoral programs are still not as prevalent in social work as they are in other disciplines. These programs are an excellent way for new scholars to refine their research portfolios and prepare for careers in academia and beyond."

Since the program's inception in 1954, Washington University and the Brown School have conferred more than 220 doctoral degrees. Following are brief career accounts from several Brown School doctoral program graduates who discuss how the School's resources, faculty mentoring, and interdisciplinary approach have

helped shape their research and their careers.

Charles A. Glisson (PhD '76)

University of Tennessee Distinguished Professor Charles A. Glisson began his study of how organizational characteristics are linked to service outcomes with his dissertation work at the Brown School more than 30 years ago. He hasn't strayed far from the subject. Glisson is the founding and current director of the Children's Mental Health Services Research Center at the university's College of Social Work. This center is one of only seven research centers in the nation that focuses on children and is funded by the National Institute of Mental Health.

"I'm continuing to look at how organizations either contribute to or take away from clinicians' services to children and families — how bureaucracy can get in the way of the outcomes of service providers," says

Glisson, whose work has focused on children's welfare systems, juvenile justice, and mental health services.

Today, Glisson directs the research center's staff in studies that have included hundreds of service agencies across the country, all aimed at improving outcomes with children through organizational change.

"We've focused a lot on the culture and climate of service organizations," Glisson says. "Many of these organizations suffer from work environments that are very negative and foster high turnover rates and job burn-out. A lot of organizations promote practices that have detrimental effects on service providers that result in poor outcomes. We try to help organization managers use different strategies to reach their goals."

He credits the Brown School as one of the first doctoral programs to initiate research training for students. "The School foreshadowed where the profession was heading," says

says Glisson, who also recognizes the University's strong support of this program.

"Through the years, Washington University has invested in its social work program and it shows," says Glisson. "It's not a sexy profession these days. A lot of universities have not seen fit to invest in it."

Sanna J. Thompson (PhD '98)

Sanna J. Thompson, associate professor at the University of Texas at Austin School of Social Work, is certain that completing her doctoral studies at the Brown School has impacted her career.

"I attribute any success that I've had to getting my doctorate from Washington University," says Thompson (MSW '93). "The reason I focus on publishing is because I was trained by people who instilled that in me. The School of Social Work faculty members have a high level of expertise, and they conduct stellar research. When you work with someone who really knows what they're doing, you get hands-on training that you can't get anywhere else."

Thompson became hooked on research during her master's degree studies at the Brown School, which led her to the doctoral program. Her current research — supported by a five-year Mentored Research Scientist Career Development Award (K01) from the National Institute on Drug Abuse — is

focused on a family-based substance abuse treatment program for runaway youth from high-risk families.

"We're finding that family-based interventions that incorporate experiential activities and fun help families to talk about issues that they haven't talked about in a long while," Thompson says. "We're using a variety of mechanisms, from games to group activities, to increase engagement in the treatment process and help families develop problem-solving and conflict-management skills as well as to control substance abuse."

Thompson also teaches research courses in both her university's master's and doctoral degree programs. She offers no-nonsense advice for students interested in earning doctoral degrees in social work.

"People's work ethics vary widely," says Thompspon. "But if you go in ready to work and get the most out of your education, you'll do well anywhere."



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Sanna J. Thompson, associate professor, University of Texas at Austin School of Social Work



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**Leopoldo J. Cabassa
(PhD '05)**

Leopoldo J. Cabassa, assistant professor in the University of Southern California's (USC) School of Social Work, credits the Brown School faculty for his career preparedness.

"I was very fortunate to be trained in such a great program," says Cabassa. "The faculty members are accessible mentors who help to shape your way of thinking in research. They also prepare you to go into the job market. In professional development, they teach you how to conduct a job interview and present your work. They try to provide good professional preparation. And, they do it in a really personal manner."

Cabassa joined USC as a post-doctoral fellow in 2005 and was named assistant professor

in 2006. A native of Puerto Rico, Cabassa has continued the research interests that he brought to Washington University in both his master's degree (MSW '01) and doctoral studies. His dissertation, entitled "Hispanic Immigrants' Intentions to Seek Depression Care," was funded through a grant from the National Institute of Mental Health.

Currently, Cabassa is the principal investigator of two pilot studies examining how depression and attitudes toward depression treatments influence Latino patients' depression treatment preferences and adherence to care.

"We want to help integrate mental health care into primary care," says Cabassa. "We're studying the intersection of chronic health conditions and mental health.

Latinos tend to underutilize mental health services, and when they do get services, it tends to be of poor quality. These disparities in care impact their families, neighborhoods, and job performance. The goal of my work is to improve the health of the Latino community."

**Fred M. Ssewamala
(PhD '03)**

Fred M. Ssewamala, a native of Uganda, succinctly describes the experience of earning his doctorate from the Brown School.

"It's the best thing that's happened to me, thus far, professional-wise," says Ssewamala, assistant professor of social work at Columbia University in New York and a senior research fellow with the New American Foundation. "It's allowed me to participate in national and international policy debates and to consult with think-tank organizations. It's given me a different way of looking at development issues. If I had only finished my master's degree at Washington University (MSW '99) and gone back to Uganda, I would have been prepared to practice. But it wouldn't have given me a strong skill base in research and critical thinking."

Ssewamala also credits his Brown School training for his ability to successfully compete for private foundation and federal grants early in his career. Ssewamala is the principal investigator of "The SUUBI Program: Creating Asset-

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Fred Ssewamala, assistant professor, Columbia University School of Social Work and senior research fellow with the New American Foundation



their own micro-businesses, and accumulate assets.

These practice pieces are just as important to Ssewamala as is his doctoral education.

"You should be able to work closely with the people you're interested in helping," he says. "My experience at the housing corporation allowed me to interact with low-income, including people on welfare. ... If I didn't have this practice experience, there would have been a gap from learning to the field."

**Sarah Gehlert
(PhD '91)**

Sarah Gehlert is a professor in the School of Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago, where she serves as deputy dean for research. She is also a professor at the university's Institute for Mind and Biology. As a Brown School graduate, Gehlert was well prepared for her role as principal investigator of one of the first big units of the National Institutes of Health

Roadmap for Medical Research for the 21st century. One of the NIH Roadmap's initiatives is to create research teams of the future, including interdisciplinary research.

"Washington University did something other doctoral programs don't do," says Gehlert, who is president-elect of the Society for Social Work and Research. "While other programs encourage students to take courses outside social work, Washington University had a reputation for including professors from other areas in mapping out curriculum. It wasn't unusual for me to seek out others from other fields."

As one of only eight centers funded by the first initiative of the NIH Roadmap, the Centers for Population Health and Health Disparities at the University of Chicago received \$9.7 million in late 2003 to study chronic diseases, such as breast cancer, and their disproportionate effect on some groups. Each research team must include social scientists, behavioral scientists, and biological scientists, according to Gehlert.

"Before, 'interdisciplinary' meant that a bunch of people wrote parts of a grant and came back together after doing their research," says Gehlert. "Now, we share the project's overall design and questions and work with community shareholders."

Gehlert's interdisciplinary team is focused on understanding the role of social environments in the expression of breast cancer genes. African-American women living in a range of neighborhoods on Chicago's South Side, some with very high rates of crime, are being enrolled in this study as soon as they are diagnosed with breast cancer.

"We're measuring a four-block environment from their homes to see if high crime and unsafe housing affects women's expression of breast cancer genes," says Gehlert. "We think the reverse is also true — that in good neighborhoods there's less expression of breast cancer genes."



In contrast to Chicago's South Side — where individuals often live isolated lives — Gehlert's team is studying women in Nigerian villages, where it is unusual to live alone. Additionally, the Nigerians offer genetic founder information about African-Americans, said Gehlert.

"The Brown School taught me to think big," she says. ☺

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Leopoldo J. Cabassa, assistant professor, University of Southern California's (USC) School of Social Work

