

BUILDING SOCIAL WORK RESEARCH CAPACITY

# Doctoral Education in Social Work

JEANE W. ANASTAS

OXFORD



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# DOCTORAL EDUCATION IN SOCIAL WORK





## The Crisis, the Study, and the Book

In the early 21st century, social work is experiencing a “crisis” in doctoral education. This crisis has most often been described as a shortage of applicants to and graduates from doctoral programs in schools of social work despite a steady increase in the number of doctoral *programs* housed in schools of social work (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2010; O’Neill, 2000; Robb, 2005). There have also been complaints, less publicized, about uneven quality in graduates, especially with respect to their research skills and their ability to be productive enough as scholars to earn tenure in many higher education settings—concerns perhaps related to a lack of selectivity in graduate admissions in the field including doctoral programs (Kirk, Kil, & Corcoran, 2009).

A different complaint has been about an emphasis on social science rather than professional social work in doctoral education, reflected in the fact that fewer doctoral programs in schools of social work now require a Master of Social Work (MSW) degree for admission (Reisch, 2002; Zastrow & Bremner, 2004). Because national accreditation standards require both the MSW and practice experience for certain key roles in social work education, some doctoral students and graduates without the degree or the post-MSW practice experience feel at a disadvantage in the social work education job market, and some schools and departments of social work complain that producing doctoral graduates without a professional social work degree makes new faculty members even harder to

find (Zastrow & Bremner). Nevertheless, most doctoral students in social work do have an MSW (Anastas & Kuerbis, 2009), and most job advertisements for new social work academics require or prefer it (Anastas, 2006). Schilling, Morrish, and Liu (2009) found that many current faculty members in social work education lack a doctoral degree, which, although not the terminal degree for social work practice, is the terminal degree that most institutions of higher education require.

Lack of adequate financial aid for doctoral students (in amount and in duration of support) has often been cited as a problem in recruiting able and diverse students to doctoral study and as a contributing factor to the years needed to complete degree requirements. The level of financial aid now offered in social work doctoral education programs is quite variable—from generous to nonexistent. A shortage of postdoctoral fellowship programs in social work, which enable doctoral graduates to gain technical skills and begin a program of funded research and publication before assuming full-time faculty work, is also a problem. Perhaps the word *crisis* is deceptive because it suggests an acute condition; a more appropriate description of the problems with doctoral education in social work might be that used for the field of education by Shulman, Golde, Bueschel, and Garabedian (2006): “chronic and crippling” (p. 25).

Doctoral education has been of concern in many fields in the United States during this same period. In the 1990s and the first decade of the 21st century, the Carnegie Foundation, the Pew Charitable Trust, and the Council of Graduate Schools all funded or conducted studies and special projects addressing doctoral education. As a result, several key books on the subject were published (Golde & Walker, 2006; Nettles & Millett, 2006; Walker, Golde, Jones, Bueschel, & Hutchings, 2008). Particularly academics in the professions, and especially in allied health, have been discussing the nature of doctoral education, changing or debating a change to the doctorate as the terminal practice degree, and in some cases, such as nursing, adding a practice doctorate while retaining a traditional Ph.D. Within social work, the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) convened a special invitational meeting in 2006 to discuss

the state of doctoral education in social work—a discussion most often confined to the Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education in Social Work (GADE; <http://www.gadephd.org/>). By offering me an appointment as a Visiting Scholar in 2006–2007, CSWE allowed me to be part of that discussion and supported the survey of doctoral student experiences I conducted in the spring of 2007 that forms a major basis for this book.

Although the recent major recession temporarily slowed faculty hiring, social work as a whole is expected to experience growth in the labor market in the next decade (Bureau of Labor Statistics, 2010). However, social work education lacks systematic data on faculty vacancies and on how current and impending faculty retirements may affect hiring in the near future. Given the “graying” of the profession as a whole (Whitaker, Weismiller, & Clark, 2006) and of the professoriate generally, it seems that the need for doctorally prepared social work educators for the professoriate is likely to continue. In addition, the advancement of social work research will also require attention to doctoral education, whether the research takes place in schools of social work or elsewhere.

The information available on doctoral education in social work is limited. CSWE gathers statistics annually from its member programs, including information on doctoral student enrollments and graduations. These data are based on institutional reports, not on information from the students themselves, and they provide useful information on numbers and demographics. However, despite many efforts to improve on the collection and dissemination of these data, problems remain that limit their usefulness. CSWE also provides data on faculty by rank in member institutions offering baccalaureate (BSW) and MSW programs; this is the source of information on faculty members with and without a doctoral degree. Both of these sets of data are underanalyzed; for example, the demographic data on race and gender have been examined separately but not at their intersections. Unless individuals or groups request and are granted access to the data and undertake a more fine-grained analysis—as some members of the Women’s Council of CSWE recently did with respect to faculty members and gender (Sakamoto, Anastas,

McPhail, & Colarossi, 2008)—important questions will remain unanswered.

Graduates of GADE-member U.S. programs (and a few others) do submit data to the annual survey of doctoral graduates conducted by the National Science Foundation (NSF; [www.nsf.gov/statistics/srvydoctorates](http://www.nsf.gov/statistics/srvydoctorates)). However, information is not published for social work specifically (which is included in the “Social Service Professions” category), although data on this subgroup can be obtained for a modest fee (Anastas & Kuerbis, 2009). Moreover, despite past efforts to have social work added, doctoral graduates in social work are not included in the ongoing NSF survey of doctoral careers over time, meaning that there are no outcome data for the field that can be compared with information from other disciplines and professions.

Finally, there has to date been no effort to obtain information on those identifying as social workers (at least as indicated by possession of a BSW or MSW degree) who obtain a doctoral degree in a related field, either at doctoral graduation or over time. This would seem to be an important omission, because a doctoral degree in a related field is routinely listed as an acceptable credential in advertisements for faculty jobs in social work (Anastas, 2006) and because we know nothing about why these professionals choose doctoral degree programs not housed in schools of social work. This is the context in which the 2007 survey of doctoral students in GADE-member social work doctoral programs was launched.

At the time this survey was conducted, we sincerely believed that it was the first such national effort in social work. However, I subsequently discovered that a more ambitious study of doctoral students and potential doctoral students in social work was conducted in 1969 (Loewenberg, 1972). That survey, funded by the U.S. Department of Health, Education and Welfare (now Health and Human Services), was specifically designed to examine whether increasing doctoral student aid might raise the number of students earning doctoral degrees at schools of social work. The sample was obtained from the 19 schools of social work then granting the doctoral degree; 1,141 mailed surveys were returned—32 from students accepted to doctoral programs but not yet enrolled, 274 from

current doctoral students, and 118 from doctoral graduates. The other respondents were people who had inquired about a doctoral program ( $n = 402$ ) or who had been identified as very promising MSW graduates not in doctoral study ( $n = 315$ ). The findings from this study are very useful for comparison with those from our 2007 survey and are discussed in each chapter of this book as relevant. Although some things have changed (e.g., men were then 70% of social work doctoral students), what is striking is the similarity between the issues prevalent in 1968 and those of today's so-called crisis: a shortage of doctoral graduates, especially for academic positions; concerns about cost and lack of adequate financial aid; and the need to recruit younger and more diverse students to doctoral study.

## The Study

Among the many issues raised at the 2006 Doctoral Task Force meeting convened by CSWE was the need for more research on doctoral education in social work. Although longitudinal research was and remains badly needed, even a cross-sectional study would offer the opportunity to ask such questions as the following:

- Why did doctoral students in social work decide to pursue the degree, and how did they choose their programs?
- What educational and social backgrounds did they bring to their studies?
- How did they finance their education?
- What educational experiences were they having in their programs, and how satisfied were they with these experiences?
- What were their career goals and aspirations, and how satisfied were they with their preparation for future work?
- What were they looking for in new jobs?

Most of these areas are not tapped by CSWE in its annual data collection efforts, because the source of those data is *programs*, not students themselves.

### **Key Features of the Nettles and Millett (2006) Survey**

**21 universities**—including 2 historically Black universities

**11 disciplines in 5 major fields of study:** education, engineering, humanities (English and history), sciences and mathematics, and social sciences (economics, political science, psychology, and sociology)

**N = 9,036**

Oversampling of traditionally under-represented students, with weighted results to correct for this bias and to reflect national enrollments by discipline

#### **Examined predictors:**

Financial aid received

Educational debt

Peer and faculty interactions

Mentoring and advisement

Research productivity as students

Overall satisfaction

Although some survey items were derived from other sources or added for social work specificity (e.g., whether students held MSW or BSW degrees), many were drawn from the study conducted by Nettles and Millett (2006) in the fall of 1996. Their goals were “to arm current and prospective students with the power to better structure their own doctoral experiences and to provide faculty and administrators with statistical support and strategies that broaden student success and satisfaction” (p. 32). Because only social work was studied in our survey, the sampling method was much simpler, and a Web-based survey design was used. Moreover, Nettles and Millett had the resources to follow up their study and determine

how many students had completed the doctoral degree 5 years later, which we were unable to do. For this reason, some of the proximate outcomes we assessed, such as publication or presentation of a paper while a student, do not represent all that responding students would have achieved. Whereas Nettles and Millett presented their findings in the context of previous studies of doctoral education in the United States as a whole, the present study was based on what is known about doctoral education in social work specifically. Nettles and Millett included the disciplines of education and engineering in their survey to capture practice-oriented fields and one (education) where part-time doctoral study is common, and it is not surprising that findings about social work were often similar to those they identified in education.

## Survey Methods

### Framework

A brief overview of the methodology used in the 2007 survey that informs this book is given here so that readers may place the information from it in context. The conceptual framework for the survey of doctoral program experiences was loosely based on that used by Nettles and Millett in their multidisciplinary survey of doctoral students (2006, p. 28). The parameters assessed not only affect who seeks a doctoral degree but also influence how comfortable and successful doctoral study may be for students. The 2007 survey methodology differed in that only one discipline—social work—was studied, a Web-based survey with passive recruitment was used, and Canadian programs asked to be and were included. The survey instrument was shorter than that of Nettles and Millett but combined many of the items from that questionnaire with some from the 2006 NSF survey of doctoral graduates. A copy of the actual survey questions with initial raw frequencies as generated by the SurveyMonkey (Palo Alto, CA) software program is available from the author upon request.

### *Student Characteristics*

The demographic characteristics of doctoral students in the United States have long been discussed. During the latter half of the 20th century, the number of women receiving doctoral degrees steadily increased in most fields, including social work. In 2010, for the first time, women outnumbered men among doctoral degree recipients in the United States. Most professions express a need to attract more doctoral students from traditionally under-represented groups, and social work has made its own efforts in this direction, especially through CSWE's Minority Fellowship Program, but without as much success as was hoped for. International students constitute a growing proportion of graduate students in the United States overall, but little attention has been given to them in social work education (for an exception, see Raj, 2002). How best to support these students in their doctoral studies has been a recurrent topic of discussion at the annual GADE meetings of doctoral program directors.

In fields of study such as education and social work, it has long been known that many doctoral students are midcareer professionals, meaning that they are commonly older and married or partnered with family responsibilities. These circumstances affect the economics of choosing to return to school and pose challenges in meeting financial needs. As in higher education overall, it is affluent students who more often seek doctoral degrees. In light of Bourdieu's theories (Bourdieu, 1996; Costello, 2005) about the social class sorting functions of higher education, this survey also asked about the educational and occupational backgrounds of doctoral students' parents (although some respondents objected to the questions). Based on these original data, it was possible for the first time to examine the intersections among these factors (principally race, gender, and class), and significant relationships among these student characteristics were found.

### *Professional Background*

Most of the questions regarding personal background were drawn directly from Nettles and Millett (2006) and other studies of doctoral



education. Questions about prior BSW and MSW degrees were, of course, specific to issues in social work (Zastrow & Bremner, 2004; Johnson & Munch, 2010). In the disciplines, time off between degrees typically is seen as a problem; in social work doctoral admissions, however, it may be an asset because of the post-MSW practice experience gained. Therefore, the effects of prior professional activities on the proximate outcomes in this study merited examination because they may or may not be different in social work compared with other fields.

### *Admission and Enrollment Variables*

When there is a shortage of doctoral students, it is especially important to know the routes by which students decide to take this step in their professional development, including the factors that influence their choice of doctoral program. Unlike Loewenberg's 1969 study (Loewenberg, 1972), this survey did not include MSW graduates who were *not* seeking a doctoral degree and their reasons for not doing so. Aspects of student enrollment—full-time versus part-time study, employment during doctoral studies, and stage of study at the time of survey—were examined to determine whether there was variation in opinions or outcomes related to these factors.

### *Program Characteristics and Resources*

Because of concerns about respondent confidentiality and the wish for candor in responses, respondents were *not* asked to name the specific program in which they were enrolled. Some chose to do so in their qualitative comments (especially their positive ones), but to fulfill the ethical contract made with programs and with survey respondents, this information was not reported. However, program size, general resources available to support doctoral study, and the forms and amounts of financial aid received by each respondent were covered. Specific program practices assessed in the Nettles and Millett (2006) study were also examined; these ranged from provision of an orientation, written policies, and individual assessments of progress to individual ratings of satisfaction with aspects of the