

**The Doctorate in Social Work (DSW) Degree:
Emergence of a New Practice Doctorate**

**Report of the Task Force on the DSW Degree Convened by the Social Work
Leadership Forum**

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Introduction

Although the first doctoral degrees in social work were PhD programs (note those offered by Bryn Mawr and the University of Chicago in 1920), a new degree, the doctorate in social work (DSW) emerged in the late 1940s. The earliest DSW degrees were offered at Catholic University in 1947 and, in 1948, at the University of Pennsylvania and Smith College; the first DSW degrees were conferred in 1951 (Catholic University of America, 2009). Some of those universities that had been offering a PhD in social work converted the degree to a DSW program (e.g., Catholic University where the PhD program began in the 1934). One source suggested that this development of a DSW was intended to “increase the status of the profession” (Paulson, 2006).

The number of social work doctoral programs grew significantly in the 1960s and 1970s. In fact, 20 new programs began between 1965 and 1975 (Crow & Kindelsperger, 1975). In the early 1970s the number of universities offering the DSW had surpassed those offering the PhD with 11 offering the DSW, 8 offering the PhD, and 2 offering both degrees (Bolte, 1971). However, beginning in 1975, the number of programs offering each type of degree was evenly split with 17 programs offering each type of degree. In a survey conducted of doctoral programs in 1975 (Crow & Kindelsperger), programs were asked what type of degree they would offer

(PhD or DSW) if beginning the program today; program representatives reported an overwhelming preference for the PhD.

One source suggests that this shift to a preference for the PhD over the DSW was associated with the emergence of practice doctorates in other fields (e.g., Psy.D), and the corresponding desire to emphasize the research nature of a doctoral degree in social work (Cnaan, Draine, & Dichter, 2008). A comparison of the DSW and PhD programs in the 1970s seemed to suggest that by that time there was no real difference between either the coursework or the structures of the two degree programs (Bernard, 1977; Bolte, 1971; Crow & Kindelsperger, 1975). However, over time, confusion grew both within the social work field, in academe, and in the general public about whether the DSW was an advanced practice or research degree as many of those with the degree entered academic institutions as researchers. By the late 1990s, most social work universities in the United States were offering a PhD as the research doctorate. By the late 1990s, the DSW had all but disappeared. There were a few schools that continued to offer an advanced practice degree such as the PhD in Clinical Social Work at New York University, but, over time, even that degree became a research focused degree.

Recently, there has been resurgence in interest in advanced clinical training in social work, leading at least one program, the University of Pennsylvania, to offer both a research doctorate (PhD) and an advanced practice doctorate (DSW). It has been argued that the resurgence of interest in the DSW degree is in response to the fact that many of the allied health professionals have moved toward a terminal practice degree at the doctorate level, including nursing (ND), pharmacy (PharmD), psychology (PsyD), physical therapy (DPT), doctorate in rehabilitative counseling (PhD), and nutrition (DSN) for example. Against this backdrop, it is

not surprising that there has been a resurgence of interest in an advanced practice doctoral degree in social work. Social work practitioners with a master's degree understand the implicit disadvantage to a terminal practice degree at the master's level when working with peers from other disciplines holding doctorates. In fact, there is anecdotal evidence that many social workers are pursuing practice doctorates in other professions (particularly the PsyD) precisely because of the lack of such an option in social work education.

Another salient issue emerged as a result of the move away from granting DSW degrees and replacing them with the more research-focused PhD. The DSW, as an unconferred degree, was adopted by the for-profit educational institutions as a means of providing an advanced social work degree unencumbered by accredited masters or bachelor degree programs. Social work, as a profession, became vulnerable to title infringement in as much as academic institutions can develop practice doctorates in social work (DSW) that are free standing and independent of master's degree programs. Graduates from all social work doctoral programs are eligible for licensure as clinical social workers in 41 states without training at either the master's or the baccalaureate levels as a social worker (ASWB, 2009). As concerns about this grew, the Leadership Forum and the Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education (GADE) recommended the development of a Task Force on Advanced Clinical Practice. The Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) recruited interested members and agreed to convene the Task Force to assess the growing need for an advanced practice degree beyond the master's level in social work, and to create recommendations for future program development that will benefit both the institutions and the profession.

To that end, a preliminary task force work group comprised of Barbara Rittner (GADE), Alberto Godenzi (National Association of Deans and Directors of Schools of Social Work), Donna DeAngelis (Association of Social Work Boards - ASWB), Amanda Randall (ASWB President), James “Ike” Adams (CSWE Commission on Accreditation), Lorraine Midanik (St. Louis Group), Michael Daley (Association of Baccalaureate Program Directors), Phyllis Black (Marywood University), Richard Edwards (Dean, Rutgers University), Alan Dettlaff (CSWE Commission on Educational Policy), and Mildred “Mit” Joyner (CSWE) and staff from the Council on Social Work Education met in December 2010 to discuss some of the key issues that need to be addressed.

The members of the task force recognized that the profession of social work needs to consider guidelines that will:

- Assess the need for the advanced professional doctorate;
- Clarify the distinction between the advanced master’s level degree and the advanced practice doctorate;
- Clarify the purpose of the professional doctorate, including conceptually the core concepts and competencies;
- Describe potential professional applications of the advanced practice doctorate in both direct practice and academic settings;
- Develop guidelines for advanced practice doctorate programs; and
- Determine the impact of advanced practice doctorate on eligibility for licensure as a clinical social worker.

Challenges

During the last 10 years, more social workers are pursuing the clinical degrees in other professions such as the PsyD. At the same time, research-focused doctoral programs have been expanding with currently about 71 programs in the US and 9 in Canada along the US border. For many practitioners in social work, the MSW has been considered the terminal professional degree and yet apparently there is a growing desire among a subset of social work practitioners to have a practice doctorate. The growing complexity of providing care, especially in the context of best practices reflecting the current cutting edge interdisciplinary research, makes it understandable why the DSW is now evolving into an advanced practice degree. However, there are concerns about programs without grounding in the core competencies of social work at the master's and baccalaureate levels developing a DSW program and therefore creating a social work degree without a clear identity with the profession. It is important that as these practice doctorates develop, social work address key challenges in formulating curricular elements:

- Developing Guidelines which will help to inform programs wishing to develop a DSW without becoming proscriptive about what the specific curricular elements must be;
- Develop concepts of needed advanced competencies within the complex environments in which social work practice occurs;
- Disseminate advanced practice knowledge and create appropriate forums to disseminate that knowledge;
- Create leadership skills to strengthen the practice of advanced social work at the doctoral level;
- Determine what additional credentials might be needed to reflect this level of training and expertise;

- Create a means of marketing and branding of the degree that create legitimate expectations about the scope of practices;
- Increase the value of the degree within the various practice arenas, including academe;
- Ensure that the title of social worker at all levels is grounded in the strengths and values of the educational standards set forth in Schools of Social Work offering a continuum of educational levels.

Overarching Concepts

Advanced Practice Title - Concept

Not all advanced practice doctorates should be or even are likely to be focused solely on advanced clinical practice. Therefore, it is recommended that, rather than using the term “clinical” doctorate in social work, the more encompassing language of **advanced practice doctorate** be adopted. In general, programs with advance practice doctorates would confer DSW degrees while those offering advanced research doctorates would confer a PhD.

The nursing profession grappled with this distinction, and formulated clear differentiating language. Drawing from their efforts, the Task Force recommends endorsement of the following concept:

The term practice, specifically social work practice, as conceptualized in this document refers to any form of social work interventions that influence the well-being of individuals or populations, including direct care practice, management of care for individuals and populations, administration of social services and allied health services organizations, and the development and implementation of health policy. The practice doctorate level

includes advanced preparation in social work, based on evidence-based best practices, at the highest levels of social work practice¹

Need for the DSW in Multiple Arenas

The advanced practice doctorate is an important recent development in community-based professional social work practice and this degree is expected to fill any number of growing needs in social service agencies, health and mental health care institutions, and community organizations. Roles may include policy development and analyses, practitioners and administrators in nonprofit and non-government organizations, institutions of higher learning, and in individual practice (private practice) arenas. As the demand grows for experts with advanced practice skills, social work would be well-served to have a clear presence of doctoral level practitioners. What distinguishes this level of practice is that those holding this degree will be experts beyond the master's level social work in practice or policy expertise and will contribute to continuously improving advanced practice competencies among social workers and other service practitioners. Their training will uniquely position them as active participants in the dissemination of knowledge about those advanced practice competencies. Additionally, academic institutions have indicated a growing need for faculty holding a terminal degree in the profession who trained as advanced practitioners and come into academe with a strong practice background. This degree would further the recruitment efforts for practitioner-scholars on faculties nationally and internationally. These advanced faculty practitioners will co-exist with

¹ This language was adapted from the Position Statement on the Practice Doctorate in Nursing see; www.aacn.nche.edu

research faculty and are likely to collaborate on social work literature as members of multidisciplinary teams and, thereby, enhance and expand the body of knowledge in social work.

Degree Focus

In general, it is expected that the advanced practice doctoral degree will provide students with 5 key elements:

- Advanced practice knowledge and skills beyond those obtained at a master's level;
- Greater emphasis on differential theoretical approaches to social problems and practice approaches;
- Advanced knowledge about and skills in cutting edge and emerging intervention strategies and their application in practice/program/community settings;
- Enhanced practice competency in evaluation skills that include practice/program/community evaluation and the use of cutting edge research strategies to these evaluate advances;
- Emphasis on scholarly dissemination of advanced practice skills and competencies.

Preliminary Advanced Practice Doctorate Guidelines:

Following the initial meeting of the task force, subsequent meetings were held in Tampa, Florida in January 2011 and in Cincinnati, Ohio in February 2011 to expand on the concept of guidelines. This is a summary of guideline suggestions for the advanced practice doctorate.

Scope of the Degree:

This degree is recognized part of a continuum of social work practice that begins at the baccalaureate level and may now culminate in advanced practice doctorate. It is expected that

any program providing an advanced practice doctorate would be housed in a college, school, or program of social work that is part of a larger accredited institution. Further, that the program will be an extension of knowledge and skills already articulated through accreditation in accredited school of social work. Therefore, at minimum, this degree will be offered by an accredited college, school, or program of social work offering an accredited masters degree and by a program that has faculty with the requisite credential to be able to support the program.

Key Elements:

Faculty: The advanced practice doctorate is expected to build upon the advanced practice knowledge and skills being offered in the accredited masters level program.

It is suggested that faculty teaching in this program have an advanced degree at the doctorate level from a social work program.

- It is suggested that the faculty assigned to the advanced practice degree have the skills to provide both advisement and mentoring to students seeking this degree.
- It is suggested that faculty have a strong scholarly record in examining and disseminating scholarship on practice related topics.
- It is suggested that at least one member of the faculty assigned to this program hold a current advanced practice license (e.g. LCSW or LICSW) if the program is clinical in focus.
- It is suggested that the faculty to student ratio for an advanced practice doctorate would be 2.5 FTE faculty per 15 students.

- All faculty teaching in the program are not required to all hold MSWs or the equivalent, but it is suggested that all faculty have both professional and scholarly records in advanced practice.

Admission Criteria: Each program should articulate clear admission criteria in the following areas:

- It is suggested that all programs articulate as a condition of admission that applicants have an MSW or related degree from a social work program that is accredited by the Council of Social Work Education or the equivalent international professional accrediting body.
- It is suggested that all programs articulate as a condition of admission that applicants have a minimum of 2 or more years of post master degree practice experience.
- It is suggested that all programs will articulate as a condition of admission the scope of post masters practice expected, how applicants will documented the experience, and will articulate types of supervision expected as a condition of admission.
- It is suggested that all programs articulate as a condition of admission eligibility for or possession of a license is required if it is consistent with scope and focus of the doctorate given.

Program of Study

- It is suggested that each program develop a course of study that builds from the advanced practice competencies provided at the master's level.

- It is suggested, within the institution's guidelines, that enrolled students have both required and elective courses.
- It is suggested that coursework offered enhances and expands the student's advanced competencies and skills that focuses on direct practice.
- It is suggested that each student engage in active practice based research and disseminate findings through presentations and publications.
- It is suggested that each student have, as part of the course of study, an opportunity to develop skills as a scholar-practitioner.

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