



Thinking About Getting a Doctoral Degree?

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Abstract

Since the MSW remains the terminal degree for practice, doctoral education is optional for clinical social workers. However, practitioners may consider earning a doctoral degree to advance their careers. Doctoral education is not for everyone, and this paper provides information about getting a doctoral degree to help practitioners make an informed decision. Social work now has over 100 doctoral programs and two types of doctoral degrees: the traditional Ph.D. and the “practice doctorate” called the DSW. These expanded options raise many questions about whether to get a doctoral degree; whether to choose a Ph.D. or DSW program; what doctoral study is like; what applications usually require; and what social workers with doctoral degrees do once they graduate. Issues of diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) in doctoral programs are also discussed as they are important to all potential students but especially those who identify as BIPOC. There are also tips on how to survive and thrive while in a doctoral program, reassuring practitioners that getting a doctoral degree is possible. Finally, new directions in doctoral education in social work are discussed, which include the option of online study and changes to integrate anti-racist thinking into the curriculum and research.

Keywords Doctoral education · Ph.D. in social work · DSW · Practice doctorate · Clinical social work · Knowledge development · Professional development

Clinical social workers engage in lifelong learning if only because relicensure requires continuing education credits. However some turn to institutes and other more intensive forms of post-master’s education because they crave more in depth learning. Doctoral education is another way to satisfy the urge to develop and deepen one’s skills and expertise. Practitioners who find themselves becoming experts in and passionate about a particular area may want a credential that will document that expertise.

Doctoral programs are designed to produce social workers who can add to the knowledge base of the profession, and clinical social workers have much to contribute. Practice experience confers a lot of knowledge about the achievements of and challenges faced by clients, families and communities as well as about what works best to meet people’s needs. Many social workers are committed to achieving social justice and have extensive knowledge about the systemic barriers, the unmet needs, and the unsung strengths

of marginalized groups. Paradigms for engaging in anti-racist and anti-oppressive research and scholarship are now emerging in the profession that are enriching doctoral education (Lee et al., 2020; Schiele et al., 2020). Often students from traditionally marginalized and oppressed groups have a strong motivation to serving the communities they identify with, which can be another reason to seek a doctoral degree.

These days there are more options for earning a doctoral degree in social work than ever before. The number of Ph.D. programs in social work in the United States and Canada continues to increase slowly (Aquavita & Tice, 2015; CSWE, 2021; <http://www.gadesocialwork.org/>). The twenty first century has also seen the emergence and rapid growth of practice doctoral programs that confer a DSW degree. Becoming a scholar—generating and disseminating new knowledge—is the most important aim of doctoral study of any kind. However, these two types of doctoral programs differ greatly in how scholarship is defined. In general, Ph.D. programs, especially those housed in research universities, emphasize empirical research and research methodology while DSW programs aim to produce “practitioner scholars” and leaders in the world of practice (Bradley et al., 2022; Richardson, 2006).

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This article will cover the reasons doctoral students give for getting a doctoral degree and the pros and cons of doing so; how Ph.D. and DSW programs differ; how to identify doctoral programs that may suit you; typical program requirements including dissertations and capstone projects; and what graduates of doctoral programs wind up doing with their degrees. As is unfortunately true of social work education at BSW and MSW levels, BIPOC students may face some challenges during doctoral education, which will also be discussed. Deciding to earn a doctoral degree is a big step in one's career, and the aim of this article is to help social workers make an informed decision about getting one (or not) and finding the best program for you and your goals.

To position myself in relation to this article, I am an old white woman with a Ph.D. whose career has been in social work education. I have directed or co-directed Ph.D. programs at two different schools of social work in addition to mentoring and teaching in them and in a DSW program. I have also written about doctoral education including having conducted two surveys of doctoral students, one published (Anastas, 2012) and one not (Anastas & Park, 2019). While I am not a clinical social worker, my academic career has been in schools that have been defined as specializing in clinical social work practice. I have invested a lot in doctoral education and would like to see more social workers with doctoral degrees as we have fewer of them than in comparable professions where the doctoral degree is not the terminal practice degree. However, doctoral education is not for everyone, and there are many good reasons that a social worker might decide not to go for such a degree. Social workers know a lot that deserves recognition, and earning a doctoral degree is one way to advance this knowledge.

Getting a Doctoral Degree: Why and When

Deciding to earn a doctorate in social work is a big step, and there are pros and cons for doing so. Some want the credential for the prestige it confers in health care settings, where doctoral degrees, especially practice degrees, are becoming more common in other healthcare professions. Others think that this credential will enhance referrals or advertise expertise in independent practice. Those in agency practice may hope to advance their careers in organizational leadership. Others want the degree to enter or remain in social work education on a full time basis. Other common reasons given by doctoral students are the wish to learn more about an area of practice or a population in need, to learn about doing research, and a more general wish for intellectual renewal.

Many Ph.D. or DSW graduates want to develop careers in social work education. Many DSW students and some Ph.D. students have already provided field instruction or have taught on an adjunct basis, and others may move into

these roles during or after their studies are completed. However, not all doctoral programs offer formal instruction in this area, and only about half of Ph.D. program websites mentioned educating teachers as a program goal and few mentioned practice (Drisko et al., 2015; Maynard et al., 2017). It is not yet clear how many DSW programs offer courses in teaching, but it may be more common in them (Bradley et al., 2022).

While a majority of Ph.D. applicants state that obtaining a fulltime faculty job is a goal, only about half of Ph.D. graduates take up faculty positions upon completion of their studies. In their small study of students and graduates in one DSW program, Bradley et al. (2022) found that the most common benefit anticipated from earning the DSW was academic or teaching opportunities.

The original expectation was that Ph.D. and not DSW graduates would find fulltime tenure-track faculty jobs. However, it is now clear that DSW graduates are also able to obtain fulltime faculty jobs on a contract basis (non-tenure-bearing lines), especially in teaching practice and in internship learning. In some kinds of schools and in some geographic areas, tenure-track positions in all areas may also be open to them.¹ Many departments and schools of social work are open to hiring those with DSWs as well as those with Ph.D.s (Barsky et al., 2014).

In doctoral education, students must transition from being only consumers of research and scholarship to being producers of new knowledge. Students admitted to doctoral programs know how to be successful in taking courses, but dissertations and capstone projects require them to work independently and to add to social work knowledge in some way. Therefore, many doctoral courses have writing assignments. Some programs—both PhD and DSW—have publication and/or making presentations as graduation requirements and others encourage this as a benchmark of student success. Bradley et al. (2022) found that the majority of the DSW students and graduates they surveyed were judged to have demonstrated scholarly leadership.

Unlike MSW degrees that require the equivalent of 1 year (advanced standing) or 2 years of work, doctoral study takes more time. Most DSW programs are designed for working professionals, and they are often designed on an “executive,” accelerated model designed for students to finish in 3 years' time, often including year-round study. Ph.D. programs are even longer with 2–3 years of classroom study followed by additional requirements like research internships,

¹ See Chap. 8 in Anastas (2022) for a further description of faculty jobs, job retention including earning tenure, and the nature of faculty work.

examinations, and dissertation research² to complete. Ph.D. students are rarely able to work fulltime while they are studying, making the cost in lost income quite large (termed an “opportunity cost”).

While a few social work students enroll in joint MSW/Ph.D. programs or apply to doctoral programs as they are finishing the MSW degree,³ social workers begin their doctoral studies some time after receiving their MSW degrees. The average age of doctoral students in social work is between 30 and 40, but there are some who are older especially in DSW programs where post-MSW practice is generally a prerequisite. Older applicants may feel “rusty” when it comes to their academic skills, although they usually adapt quite quickly. In addition, practice experience can lead to an interest in changing policies or developing new knowledge to inform practice in the future.

Many doctoral students report that it was a former professor, supervisor, or mentor of some kind who first mentioned the possibility of doctoral study to them. When a respected senior social worker expresses confidence that someone could be successful in doctoral education, it may make getting the degree seem more possible.

Finally, other life goals like forming relationships, planning for or engaging in child-rearing, the impact on the education or career of a spouse or other family member, and even elder care responsibilities need to be considered. While there is rarely a “perfect time” to get a doctorate, finding the “right time” can be important, and it is not uncommon for professional social workers to invest time in exploring options and making the decision to apply.

There are many reasons for deciding not to get a doctoral degree. These include family and community commitments, which may be especially true for BIPOC social workers (Tijerina & Deepak, 2014). Expense is an obvious barrier, both tuition costs and adding to the burden of loans from prior study, but some Ph.D. programs may offer free tuition and stipends to the small number of fulltime students admitted each year. The need for better funding for students was the most common complaint among social work Ph.D. students surveyed (Anastas, 2012), and this is no doubt a concern for DSW students as well. In addition to direct costs, there is an opportunity cost involved in giving up income from practice or other fulltime employment. To address this barrier, DSW programs are designed for working professionals, and DSW students commonly state that the flexibility to

allow continuing employment was a major reason for choosing the DSW (Bradley et al., 2022).

As to salary with the doctoral degree, the areas within social work where people earn the most are administration, academia and independent practice. Entering into academia full time is a common reason students give for getting both a Ph.D. and a DSW (Anastas, 2012; Anastas & Park, 2019). However, entry level salaries in academia can be lower than what one may have earned previously, although they rise over time and with promotion in rank.

Choosing a Doctoral Program

Despite a well-developed set of accreditation standards from CSWE that all programs must meet, MSW programs vary greatly in what they do and do not offer by way of curriculum. Doctoral programs and the schools that house them are even more varied, and they vary within each type (DSW and PhD). Therefore, it is important to find out as much as possible about any doctoral program you are considering.

The GADE website (<http://www.gadesocialwork.org/>) is an essential resource for finding out more about doctoral programs in the United States and Canada. All of GADE member programs—Ph.D. and DSW—are listed by state, with links to the programs’ websites where information about admission requirements, curriculum, and requirements for earning the degree can be found. The website also contains the latest version of the “Quality Guidelines for Ph.D. Programs in Social Work” (2023), an aspirational set of standards that can be helpful in identifying what resources a high-quality PhD program should provide.

When it comes to quality indicators for DSW programs, CSWE is piloting a set of accreditation standards for DSW programs since they are defined as offering practice degrees. The draft accreditation standards can be found at www.cswe.org/accreditation and may suggest things to look for in choosing among DSW programs. In addition, CSWE’s annual statistical reports on social work education provide some outcome data on doctoral graduates in social work although the most recent report available as of this writing is from 2020 (CSWE, 2021).

Ph.D. or DSW?

The DSW programs in existence today are a recent development in the field, and there was a lot of controversy about them. In the past, about half of social work doctoral programs called their degrees DSW rather than Ph.D., but in the second half of the twentieth century almost all converted to awarding a Ph.D. (Goodman, 2016; Kurzman, 2015). A new form of DSW program—one termed a “practice doctorate” that is designed to co-exist with Ph.D. programs in

² As of this writing there is at least one DSW program that requires the completion of a dissertation, extending the time to completion as a result.

³ For those considering a fulltime career in social work academia, it is important to know that without two years of post-MSW practice experience, some roles will not be open to them due to accreditation requirements. And while not all Ph.D. Programs require an MSW degree, over 90% of Ph.D. students have the degree.

social work—emerged at the start of the twenty first century (Acquavita & Tice, 2015; Diaz, 2014).

Many involved in Ph.D. education were opposed to this new kind of program as being less rigorous and possibly eroding the gains in perception of the quality of social work research being produced in social work Ph.D. programs, which have been becoming ever more rigorous and research oriented. Others were concerned that practice doctorates might become the terminal practice degree in social work as was happening in some health professions like audiology, pharmacy, and occupational therapy. However, in those latter fields, the practice doctorate was not expected to co-exist with the Ph.D. as in true in fields like education and psychology (the well known example of the Ph.D. and the Psy.D.) as in social work. In fact, one argument made for the emergence of the practice oriented DSW was to retain clinicians seeking a degree such as the Psy.D. within social work education.

Ph.D. Programs

The first and most obvious difference between these types of doctoral programs is their primary goals. Ph.D. programs are aimed at producing scholars of the “discipline” or of academic social work compared to scholars of the profession (what Richardson, 2006, calls “scholars of the enterprise).” The GADE *Quality Guidelines for Ph.D. Programs in Social Work* (2023) describes the purpose of Ph.D. programs: “The Ph.D. degree in social work is a research doctorate that aims to prepare students to be scientists, scholars, and stewards of the discipline” (p. 2). A steward of the discipline is a scholar who “generates and critically evaluates new knowledge, conserves the most important ideas and findings that are the legacy of the discipline, understands how knowledge is transforming the discipline and the larger world, and communicates that knowledge responsibly to others” (p. 2). A common purpose shared by doctoral programs is to produce the next generation of faculty members, grant-funded researchers, and leaders in practice and policy settings. Other characteristics mentioned were competency in critical analysis and developing expertise in one or more areas of specialization. The recent revision of the Guidelines (2023) now includes being stewards of the profession as well as the discipline, but descriptions of DSW programs and the proposed standards for them use the word “practice” more extensively (see below).

The latest revision of the *Guidelines* describes the domains in quality Ph.D. education as including a commitment to anti-racism, diversity, equity and inclusion and to teaching. Excellence in mentorship and advising are described as essential since this has been an area of student complaint (Anastas, 2012).

Concretely, research-oriented Ph.D. programs, especially those housed in research universities, emphasize learning about research methods and grant-funded research and can

offer the chance to collaborate with faculty members with research grants that support their work. These research-intensive programs may seek to re-orient students from a practice focus to a research focus (see for example Mendenhall, 2007; Zastrow & Bremner, 2004). As a result, Joyce et al. (2022) describe a period of liminality when beginning Ph.D. students are no longer practitioners, although they may identify as such, but not yet doctoral scholars.

DSW Programs

DSW or practice doctoral programs aim to produce “practitioner scholars” who may or may not conduct empirical research but who can synthesize, transform, and disseminate knowledge for practice. Therefore, they generally require the MSW and post-master’s experience. At this point, most DSW programs are focused on advanced clinical practice, but others focus on social work education or other kinds of practice.

The set of proposed accreditation standards currently being piloted by CSWE (2023) is (www.cswe.org/Accreditation), which was developed in 2015, states that professional doctoral programs (DSW) should prepare *doctoral practitioners* to:

- engage in systematic inquiry that adheres to scholarly conventions;
- use and evaluate research-informed practice critically and at an advanced level;
- develop and disseminate practice-relevant knowledge through a variety of channels, such as teaching, scholarship, professional presentations, mentoring and administration;
- demonstrate leadership in social work practice and education; and
- develop and maintain substantive expertise in one or more areas of social work practice (p. 1).

While research and scholarship are mentioned, the emphasis is on knowledge about practice.

As is true for Ph.D. programs and the *Quality Guidelines*, it is unlikely that any one DSW program will be well-developed in all of these areas.

In a section of the proposed standards on the implicit curriculum, the program must describe “how it creates a diverse and inclusive environment that promotes respectful discourse.” As work on these proposed standards continues, it is likely that content on anti-racist and anti-oppressive practices will be added as it has been to the latest accreditation standards for BSW and MSW programs.

Other Factors in Choosing a Program

Many social work professionals are place-bound due to employment or personal considerations. Geographic accessibility is therefore an important factor to consider in choosing a doctoral program. A couple of Ph.D. programs are wholly virtual and a few more are hybrid, but the vast majority are still based in face-to-face classroom learning. Synchronous learning is the preferred online modality (Myers et al., 2019). By contrast, the majority of DSW programs are delivered online, with or without some periods of residency (on campus study). Some online programs feature asynchronous learning while others have mostly synchronous offerings such as regularly scheduled course meetings (CSWE, 2021; Myers et al., 2019). One reason given by PhD programs for retaining face-to-face study is that doctoral education requires socialization into academic life, research culture, and close work with faculty mentors, which is best done in a campus environment.

Online doctoral programs provide access to those who live in rural and other areas where there may be few or far-flung social work programs that offer a doctoral degree. However, as is true at the BSW and MSW levels of education, some students adapt more readily to online study than others. As telemedicine has become a more common mode of clinical practice, more social workers are likely to feel comfortable in the online learning environment than was true before the COVID-19 pandemic.

It is important to consider doctoral programs at HBCUs and programs with the mission of specializing in service to Hispanic/Latinx populations. However, most doctoral programs are housed in historically and predominantly White institutions (PWI). I do not know of any social work doctoral programs that are housed in institutions serving Native/Indigenous people, but some schools have faculty members who identify as Native and/or who write about indigenous issues (see the section on DEI below).

Based on these differences in purposes, it is important to read the mission statements and goals of the school and the doctoral program. Admissions decisions are often based on the goodness of fit between what an applicant wants and what the goals and resources of the program are.

It is also a good idea to look at the list of courses in each program you are considering or when deciding on a DSW or Ph.D. While few may be drawn to research methods courses, think about whether you would be interested in the content of the other courses. BIPOC (and other) students may want to know how much BIPOC or anti-racist content there is in the curriculum. Nevertheless, many BIPOC students may choose a PWI for a variety of reasons.

The number of Ph.D. programs that are interdisciplinary is growing since many believe that working in multidisciplinary teams is desirable in funded research as well as in

practice (Kemp & Nurius, 2015). The “wicked” problems social workers address in practice and research are complex, and therefore their research may benefit from what other disciplines bring to the table. In some Ph.D. programs, there is a requirement for interdisciplinary study while in others it is an option some might pursue. In general, DSW programs are wholly focused on social work, and some Ph.D. programs are as well.

When choosing a program, it is also important to consider whether there are faculty members teaching in the program who have expertise in the topics that are important to you. In doctoral education, especially in Ph.D. programs, students work more closely with faculty members than is usual in MSW education. If there are faculty members with large research grants, Ph.D. students can often get involved in their research and be mentored by them.

So far, this paper has addressed how to select among doctoral programs in social work. However, some social workers choose to earn a doctorate in related disciplines and professions like psychology (Psy.D.), sociology, education, human development, or public health. This choice involves studying and doing research within a host discipline. Given the scope of this paper, this issue cannot be addressed, but practitioners should know that such possibilities exist.

Making an Application

Each GADE member program (Ph.D. and DSW) will provide details about what an application will require. However, there are some common things that programs ask for. Some Ph.D. programs are required by their universities to have applicants submit GRE test scores. Often it is only extremely low scores that would give an admissions committee pause. However, as information about the bias that disadvantages BIPOC in standardized testing continues to grow, these policies may be revisited. DSW programs are less likely to require test scores. As with any standardized test, taking an exam preparation course (and there are many online) generally pays off in higher scores at least because it demonstrates what the questions will be like.

Like in an MSW application, a personal statement is always required for admission to Ph.D. and DSW programs, which is the most important part of the application. The statement is essential to programs in order to judge the fit between what the student wants to study and the mission and goals of the program as well as the availability of faculty members knowledgeable in the student's area of interest. Make sure the readers will know why you want a doctoral degree, your areas of research or professional interest, and what you plan to do once you have the degree. Also note that different programs have somewhat different requirements for

the statement, and if the program lays out specific topics to address, ensure that your essay includes them.

Use your best writing skills in the personal statement because it gives admissions committees a chance to see how well you write. If you are submitting the same statement to more than one program, check to see that there is no reference to any other one. Also try to be concise in what you submit and observe any length requirements for the statement. Admissions committees read many such essays in a given year, and being succinct will help them like your essay.

Diversity, Equity and Inclusion

All students benefit from having diversity in their educational environment. However, doctoral programs are not as comfortable for BIPOC students as for White ones (Davis & Livingstone, 2016). BIPOC students experience microaggressions in all educational settings, and social work doctoral programs are no exception. BIPOC students complain that the curriculum has no courses on racism and that content on racism and white supremacy is not integrated into the rest of the curriculum. Some have argued that Black women may be at special disadvantage (Jones et al., 2013). With the recent introduction of content on anti-racism and anti-oppressive practice into CSWE's accreditation standards for MSW and BSW programs, this may begin to change, change that has no doubt been accelerated by the Black Lives Matter movement and more widespread recognition of structural racism and white supremacy. In a later section of the paper, some of the beginning steps being taken to make doctoral education in social work more just and inclusive are described.

Both the latest *Quality Guidelines* for Ph.D. programs (GADE, 2023) and CSWE's latest accreditation standards for BSW and MSW programs now address anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice and learning environments. In some schools and departments, attention has already been given to these areas, although all programs would likely say that continuous ongoing work will be needed to make their programs as inclusive and welcoming to BIPOC students as possible.

Some schools of social work have embarked on programs to help faculty members include issues race, ethnicity and class in their courses and to help them with managing points of tensions that can arise in the classroom, but it may be hard to discern this from a school's web page. It is also a good idea to see if the school has a diversity officer, sometimes at the Associate Dean level, which suggests that a school understands that race and other dimensions of difference need to be addressed. Although primarily addressing MSW education, Tijerina and Deepak (2014) asked Mexican American students about their view of doctoral education, and they reported that family and community needs and doubts of their ability to succeed in getting admitted were obstacles,

which is likely true for other BIPOC social workers as well. There are not yet reliable data that compare BIPOC to white students on time to degree and attrition rates.

One factor to consider is who you will be studying with. Usually there are fewer BIPOC faculty members than White ones at PWIs. The proportion of white students in doctoral programs is a little over 50% (CSWE, 2021), so, as is true at the MSW level, the number of BIPOC students being enrolled is increasing at a higher rate than among faculty members. Many BIPOC faculty members are sought out for mentoring and support. There is also the fact that there are more BIPOC faculty members at junior levels (Lecturers, Assistant Professors) than at more senior levels, which results from a legacy of institutional racism in academia. It also affects the number of courses students take that are taught by BIPOC faculty members.

There are ways that BIPOC students can access support. The first and most important is through mentoring relationships with BIPOC faculty and others. In addition, some schools have affinity groups for students who identify as BIPOC. At the doctoral level of education, learning from peers is very important, and peers, both BIPOC and White allies, are an important source of support and understanding. For example, Davis and Livingstone (2016) describe how a small group of Black and White doctoral students in a PWI created their own anti-racism project to support one another and work for change in the program.

It should also be noted that the proportion of men among doctoral students is higher than in BSW programs, MSW programs, and the social work profession as a whole. Since doctoral education is a pipeline to leadership in social work, it is important that women consider themselves just as good "doctoral material" as men are.

Gender Identity and Sexual Expression

There are a few doctoral programs that are not hospitable to those studying gender identity and gender expression, most often because of the religious commitments of the college or university. Such a school's website will state that people there must pledge to adhere to the tenets of their religion. And since there is no federal law that provides civil rights protection to LGBTQI+ people, it may be useful to see if the program's city and state has those protections in place, which may indicate a general social climate that is more hospitable.

Requirements for Granting the Degree

Passing the courses taken in the program is obviously required in doctoral programs just like in other degrees. In both Ph.D. and DSW programs, there are usually many required courses, but some offer elective courses as well.

Since doctoral students have already proven themselves as academically able in such settings, meeting this requirement may be easier than some of the other ones even if the course content is somewhat different.

The most common requirement in Ph.D. programs is completion of a dissertation, a piece of independent research and scholarship that demonstrates a graduate's ability to design and carry out the research using sound methodology and deep knowledge of the topic they are addressing. Most dissertations are based in quantitative research rather than qualitative, although 22% used qualitative methods (Maynard et al., 2014), which has likely increased. The form of the dissertation is usually a monograph, but some programs now offer the option of writing three (3) related publishable papers based in their research. Some DSW and Ph.D. programs require conference presentations. For those headed to academia, these activities provide the benefit of developing a record of publication and presentation before the awarding of the degree, which is a plus factor in applying for faculty positions in social work. However, the writing of the papers is likely to take longer than writing the traditional monograph from which papers can later be developed. A few DSW programs also require the publication of papers or completion of a dissertation.

The dissertation process occurs in two stages: the development and acceptance of the dissertation proposal and the submission of the completed dissertation (research report). While details differ, students typically work with a primary mentor or dissertation chair along with two or more additional committee members. These faculty members provide advice and support to the project, but they are also the ones who must formally approve the dissertation proposal, that the student presents to the committee in writing and orally, and the completed dissertation itself. Successful completion of the dissertation demonstrates that the student can produce research and scholarship independently, display expertise in their chosen subject matter, and present the work well both in written form and orally.

DSW programs typically have some kind of capstone requirement—a major project or set of requirements—that, like a dissertation, go beyond course completion to document knowledge development on the part of the student. Sometimes these consist of written articles, presentations at professional conferences, the development of courses and syllabi, the production of videos and web pages, a program evaluation project involving an agency or department within one, program design or development, and others as well. The type of capstone project required differs based on the goals of the program and the skills and expertise students are expected to develop. Since the nature of the capstone requirement is determined by the program, it will involve one or two of the options listed above. Therefore, an important dimension of difference to consider when

choosing among DSW programs is the nature of what will be required of you and the time frame within which it must be completed.

Many Ph.D. programs also have an examination requirement. These may be in person or take-home examinations; while usually written, there can be oral examinations as well. Passing the examinations (usually after courses are complete) is what permits the students to proceed to working on the dissertation. Details of all of the requirements in each program for being awarded the doctoral degree are described in student manuals or handbooks available on each program website.

Making the Most of Your Doctoral Studies

This article is addressed to social workers who have not yet decided to get a doctoral degree, but, since doctoral education may seem daunting, it is important to remember that there are ways to make going through the process easier (Johnson-Motoyama et al., 2018; Powers & Swick, 2012). The most important is seeking out a mentor or advisor from the beginning and crafting a positive relationship with them. This may be especially true for BIPOC students (Jones et al., 2013). They state that an advisor should be “a reliable information source, a departmental... [and] occupational socializer, a role model, and an advocate for the advisee” (p. 239). If you are assigned someone and you then find that there is someone else on faculty you would rather work with, ask for a change. This is a common occurrence in doctoral programs, so it will not be a strange request.

Studies of student satisfaction with their doctoral education in social work and other disciplines show that positive ongoing relationships with a mentor are a big factor in success, including degree completion. This is especially true for Ph.D. students once courses end and independent work on the dissertation begins. It can be hard to feel connected to the program in that phase of study, but taking the initiative to keep in regular contact with your mentor will help a lot. DSW programs typically enroll larger classes and often use online instruction, so some have urged that more mentoring be provided to DSW students (Diaz, 2014), and our unpublished survey of students from the very early days of DSW education found that fewer DSW than Ph.D. students said they had a mentor in the program (Anastas & Park, 2019).

Another really important step for doctoral students is to find a peer or peers who understand academia as it influences your doctoral education and to support one another in your work. Other ways of getting peer support include forming small groups for writing or for teaching. Regular meetings of writing groups help keep the productivity going. Sometimes, however, peer relationships can become competitive, in which case it is best to get support elsewhere. Many DSW

programs operate on a cohort model so that members of an ongoing class can get to know one another well over time (Diaz, 2014). However limited face to face interaction in hybrid and online programs can make it harder to get the most out of peer relationships.

During doctoral study, experiencing periods of adjustment and uncertainty is normal, and lack of clarity about what you are doing and why will come and go. Joyce, Quiros and Waller speak of liminality or a time of being “betwixt and between” a practitioner identity and that of a scholar (Mendenhall, 2007; Adorno, 2015). Quiros et al. contend that introducing a “critical race-gendered approach” (p. 997) at such times makes rethinking things seem more normative and desirable. Find people to talk with during these periods—faculty and students—because clarity and resolve will return.

Sometimes it is the amount of work required that seems overwhelming, and it often is. Good self-care including talking short breaks from time to time will help. Powers and Swick (2012) also note that time management skills are essential. It can help to develop regular routines in each week—times dedicated to doing the work needed outside of the classroom.

Be prepared for “the good, bad, and ugly” in the feedback you get (Powers & Swick, 2012). For example, you may have been told that you are a good writer, but doctoral programs are preparing scholars. This means that you will be held to a higher standard—writing at a publishable level. Negative feedback may be wounding, but work it through because you can succeed. I often reassure all doctoral students that they were admitted to the program because they had proven they had the ability to succeed.

What Doctoral Graduates Do

One way or another, social workers who have earned their doctoral degrees are leaders in the profession. Many doctoral graduates find new fulltime jobs in social work education or remain in ones they already had. Many begin or continue to teach part time (adjunct lecturing or field instruction) in addition to any agency leadership job or social work practice that they are engaged in.

Social workers with doctoral degrees are also found in leadership and administrative positions in both public and private agency settings. They may work in private for profit, non-profit agencies or in independent practice including consultation. They may also engage in providing supervision and teaching in the classroom and the internship setting.

An important finding in my first survey of doctoral students (Anastas, 2012) was that many doctoral students ranked the ability to do social justice work as an important criterion for choosing a new job at graduation. This speaks

to a common observation made by those practitioners who are considering or applying for a doctoral degree: the wish to take their knowledge and their commitments to a higher level, whether that be in academia or the world of practice.

Future Directions in Doctoral Education

The trend toward *making doctoral education more accessible to working professionals*, which is evident in the growth of DSW programs designed for working practitioners, is likely to continue. Not only would this make it possible for more practitioners to access doctoral education; it might also serve to infuse more content on social work practice into the curriculum. As Ph.D. programs become ever more research focused, some worry that the gap between practice and academic scholarship is widening. Ph.D. programs often address evidence-based practice, but the profession also needs other research on its practice (Maynard et al., 2014), and practitioner scholars are needed for this to happen.

Social work and social work education need to embrace and incorporate *anti-oppressive and anti-racist practices*. In general, more content on critical theories, including queer theory, disability theory and feminism/womanism, is needed. Even in my now dated research on Ph.D. education in social work, a few students noted that curricula also needed globalization and more critical theory. As one student wrote “Doctoral education is firmly embedded in an inherently patriarchal, capitalistic, racist, sexist, homophobic... system that continues to create barriers and difficulties for those who do not wish to simply reify current hegemonic discourses and practices” (Anastas, 2012, p. 112). The latest GADE *Quality Guidelines* (2023) now addresses the need for anti-racist, anti-oppressive and inclusive education, which is an encouraging sign that changes of this kind are already underway in Ph.D. education.

On its website, GADE has a resource that includes GADE’s 2020 statement on anti-racism (Lee et al., 2020). It states: “GADE promotes socially just research and condemns the subtle and sometimes explicit racism found in social science, including in social work research” (unpaginated). The document concludes with a list of imperatives for GADE and its member programs. It also provides an extensive list of resources on anti-racism under the same tab. This document is not only useful for program directors and faculty but can also be helpful to students in choosing programs and advocating for more DEI content in their course of study.

The Society for Social Work and Research (SSWR) has also made a statement about the need for social work research to address structural racism (Herenkohl et al., 2020). Since the social work profession is about helping people and communities to thrive, the profession must

“prioritize research that disrupts patterns of oppression and white supremacy and interrogates the reasons why racism persists” (p. 366). However, Hudson’s (2017) study of Ph.D. students’ concepts of social justice suggested that, at least at the time, their understanding of social justice was rooted in equality, opportunity and advocacy, ideas that are consonant with liberalism and neoliberalism rather than with anti-oppressive or anti-racist practice that includes the imperative for social change.

Starting before and accelerated by the COVID-19 pandemic, *remote or online teaching and learning* has become ever more common at all levels of social work education. Within social work education, the literature on online education—pros and cons and best practices—is now extensive. Less has been written about it in doctoral education. While many DSW programs use it, it is assumed that *how* to educate effectively online is the same as in its use at the MSW and BSW levels.

Because of the importance of mentoring in doctoral education, contact between individual students and individual faculty members is essential. Unlike DSW education, Ph.D. education continues to incorporate something like an apprenticeship model that requires person to person contact. Therefore, even if online interactions are common at the dissertation phase of study, Ph.D. programs remain largely face to face. Residency in a program supports such traditional arrangements as teaching and research assistantships, although they too can be done online if instruction in the school’s other programs incorporates online courses and if local face to face contact is not necessary for interactions with research participants. It remains to be seen how long Ph.D. programs will elect to continue the tradition of face-to-face academic socialization on a bricks and mortar campus.

Conclusion

Doctoral education in social work is in a new period of growth due to the emergence of practice doctoral programs that award the DSW degree. These programs should not and do not replace research-oriented Ph.D. programs but rather supplement them. However, they provide additional opportunities for practitioners to obtain a doctoral degree while maintaining their involvement in practice. Ph.D. programs are continuously improving the quality of their education in research and scholarship. Simultaneously and at all levels, online education in social work is also growing, increasing access to doctoral programs, especially DSW programs. And new attention is being paid to anti-racist and anti-oppressive practice and knowledge-building, although much more remains to be done. Social work is a growth profession, and social work jobs are predicted to continue their increase. The

number of social work education programs and the need for new faculty also continue to grow, meaning that more people with doctoral degrees are needed.

The knowledge and skills of clinical practitioners need to be more effectively captured and disseminated, and those who choose to obtain a doctoral degree are often best positioned to do so. However, doctoral education is not for everyone, and continued learning and professional development can also be pursued in other ways. For those who want to enter academia on a fulltime basis, develop deeper knowledge in their areas of expertise, gain research skills, and add to the knowledge base of the profession, getting a doctoral degree may be the best way to have an impact on the field. Choosing the best doctoral program—by type of degree and within each type of degree—can be challenging, but the increase in options for doctoral study means that practitioners are likely to find a program that will suit their goals and ambitions. While deciding to apply to a doctoral program is a big step to take, a doctoral degree can open doors to rewarding and fulfilling next stages in a career.

Data Availability Data sharing not applicable to this article as no datasets were generated and analyzed during the current study.

Declarations

Conflict of interest The author has no conflict of interest to report.

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