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THE RESEARCH COMPONENT OF DOCTORAL
PROGRAMS IN SOCIAL WORK: A SURVEY

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The doctoral program in social work has traditionally been viewed as encompassing a predominantly research-oriented, knowledge-building emphasis. It is acknowledged that if social workers are to be prepared to competently understand, utilize, participate in, and produce practice-relevant empirical studies, research must constitute an integral component of the educational process at the doctoral level. The rapid increase in doctoral programs, heightened confusion over the function of the Ph.D. and DSW, current trends to reconceptualize the structure of social work education, and the obvious consequences posed by the progressive erosion of master's-level research curricula, this is an area strongly in need of immediate attention.

Few attempts have been made to systematically analyze the development and experiences of social work doctoral training and few (if any) studies have been published that focus on the research component of doctoral programs in social work.¹ Thus, the purpose of this article is to present the results of an empirically-based research study that investigates the research objectives, research content, and educational objectives of doctoral programs in social work.

METHOD

Instrument and Population

For pretest purposes, a three-page opinion questionnaire was distributed in early February, 1975 to the chairpersons of the thirty social work doctoral programs offered in the continental United States.² This instrument was designed to elicit factual and subjective information concerning the current structure and operational characteristics of the research component of the doctoral-level curriculum. All of the programs had responded by July, 1975.

The data and comments obtained from the pretest instrument were subsequently utilized to formulate a second instrument, which improved upon the first considerably by permitting a more accurate assessment of the status of the research component of social work doctoral programs. No attempts were made to check for the reliability or validity of the final instrument. In late September, 1975, a final, five-page opinion questionnaire was forwarded to the thirty doctoral programs. Once again, a 100% response rate was obtained, with all thirty chairpersons replying by mid-March.

Characteristics of Population

Of the thirty programs, 15 offered the DSW and 14 the Ph.D.; 1 offered both the DSW and Ph.D. For purposes of the following data analysis, the school offering both degrees was categorized--by means of the closest approximation of responses--with the 14 schools offering the Ph.D. The schools had an average of 11.9 full-time and part-time faculty members teaching in their

doctoral programs. Breaking this down further, the DSW programs showed an average of 11.1 and the Ph.D. programs an average of 12.5 faculty members.

The doctoral programs showed an average enrollment of 23.0 full-time (excluding ABD) students. More specifically, the DSW programs' average full-time student enrollment was 23.4, while the Ph.D. programs' was 22.7. The doctoral programs showed an average of 9.3 part-time (excluding ABD) students. Breaking this down further, the DSW programs averaged an enrollment of 9.9 part-time students, while the Ph.D. programs' enrollment was 8.7.

FINDINGS

Research Objectives

A series of items on the instrument requested the schools to rate, on a three-point scale, the importance of four research objectives in the doctoral curricula. Table 1 displays these four objectives, along with the outcome of the schools' responses. It should be noted that the schools were more concerned that their graduates become competent in understanding, producing, and participating in research than in teaching it.

Table 1

IMPORTANCE OF PREPARING DOCTORAL
STUDENTS IN FOUR OBJECTIVES OF THE
DOCTORAL RESEARCH CURRICULUM (N=30)

Objective	Importance Range		
	High	Medium	Low
Understand Research	29	0	1
Produce Research	26	4	0
Participate in Research	25	4	1
Teach Research	6	15	9

These findings show a slightly greater emphasis on participating in research and a considerably greater emphasis on producing research than was demonstrated in a similar study conducted at the master's level.³

Research Content

A total of four items requested the specification of the average percent of the current and ideal total minimum research content of the doctoral program curricula. The total minimum research content was broken down into statistics and methodology, with the classroom constituting the primary vehicle for their

presentation. No attempts were made to operationally define these two terms on the instrument. The data analysis revealed that the total minimum research component (excluding the dissertation) currently comprises a total minimum average of 34.4% of the total doctoral curricula. However, the schools would preferably raise this total minimum average to 40.6%. At first glance, this might appear to be a rather low percentage in view of the widely held assumption that the doctoral program in social work encompasses a decidedly research-oriented emphasis.

Table 2
 AVERAGE PERCENT OF CURRENT AND IDEAL
 RESEARCH CONTENT IN THE DOCTORAL CURRICULUM

Research Content	Current Percent	Ideal Percent	Difference
Statistics	11.42	13.96	-2.54
Methodology	22.93	26.68	-3.75
Total	34.35	40.64	-6.29

Further analysis revealed differences between the minimum requisite percent of current (Table 3) and ideal (Table 4) research content by the type of program. The Ph.D. programs currently require approximately 6.7% more total research content in their doctoral curricula than the DSW programs.

Table 3

AVERAGE PERCENT OF CURRENT RESEARCH CONTENT
IN THE DOCTORAL CURRICULUM BY TYPE OF PROGRAM

Research Content	Total (N=30)	Program		Difference
		DSW (N=15)	Ph.D. (N=15)	
Statistics	11.42	7.92	14.92	-7.00
Methodology	22.93	23.07	22.80	.27
Total	34.35	30.99	37.72	-6.73

Doctoral programs offering the Ph.D. degree would ideally like to have a minimum of 6.5% more total mandatory research content in their doctoral curricula than would the DSW programs.

Table 4
 AVERAGE PERCENT OF IDEAL RESEARCH CONTENT
 IN THE DOCTORAL CURRICULUM BY TYPE OF PROGRAM

Research Content	Total (N=30)	Program		Difference
		DSW (N=15)	Ph.D. (N=15)	
Statistics	13.96	10.46	17.46	-7.00
Methodology	26.68	26.93	26.43	.50
Total	40.64	37.39	43.89	-6.50

Educational Objectives

The schools were requested to indicate which of the five educational objectives listed in Table 5 currently apply to their programs. All the schools designated preparation for careers in social work education as a program objective. Of the schools, 29 declared they prepare their students for careers in research and 23 for careers in administration. Finally, 16 designated practice as a program objective and 8 preparation for careers in policy. Ten of the DSW programs listed practice as an educational objective, only 5 of the Ph.D. programs listed the same.

Table 5
 AVERAGE RANKS FOR CURRENT AND IDEAL
 EDUCATIONAL OBJECTIVES OF DOCTORAL PROGRAMS

Educational Objectives	Current Rank	Ideal Rank	Difference
Education	1.45	1.77	-.32
Research	2.41	2.18	.23
Administration	3.30	3.17	.13
Practice	4.12	4.19	-.07
Policy	4.63	4.50	.13

The schools were also requested to designate which of the five educational objectives they would ideally consider as applicable to their programs. Once again, preparation for careers in social work education was considered a program objective by all thirty schools. Of the schools, 29 declared preparation for careers in research and 26 for careers in administration as ideal educational objectives. Finally, 17 of the schools viewed practice and 8 policy as ideal program objectives.

A series of items on the instrument asked the schools to rank the current and ideal educational objectives of their doctoral programs. Table 5 displays these objectives and the ranking outcome. It should be noted that the current and the ideal

ranks of the educational objectives remained the same. The schools affirmed that while research should ideally be given a higher intra-rank position as an ideal educational objective, education should ideally be given a lower intra-rank position.

CONCLUSIONS

The findings suggest that social work doctoral programs devote approximately one-third of their curriculum to research courses. In view of the virtual nonexistence of a research component in undergraduate social work education--and its dramatic, progressive erosion at the master's level--the study findings provide a measure of welcome relief. While the research component has been moving toward--or has already reached--the "twilight zone" in certain spheres of social work academia, its integrity at the doctoral level would still appear to be intact.

NOTES

1. See, for example, Richard T. Crow and Kenneth W. Kindelsperger, "The Ph.D. or the DSW?," Journal of Education for Social Work, Vol. II (1975), pp. 38-43; Esther Sales, "The Doctoral Student Experience: A Preliminary Study," Journal of Education for Social Work, Vol. II (1975), pp. 102-108; Max Siporin, "Doctoral Education for Direct-Service Practice in Social Work," Journal of Education for Social Work, Vol. 9 (1973), pp. 78-87; Frank M. Loewenberg, "Doctoral Students in Schools of Social Work" (New York: Council on Social Work Education, 1972); and John J. Baldi, "Doctorates in Social

Work: 1920-1968," Journal of Education for Social Work, Vol. 7 (1971), pp. 11-22.

2. Council on Social Work Education, Schools of Social Work with Accredited Master's Degree Programs (New York: Council on Social Work Education, 1974).

3. Sidney E. Zimbalist, "The Research Component of the Master's Degree Curriculum in Social Work: A Survey Summary," Journal of Education for Social Work, Vol. 10 (1974), p. 120.