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Turning Doctoral Students into Faculty in Gerontological Social Work: The AGE*SW* Experience

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Abstract

Developing faculty interested in aging may help social work meet the needs of our growing aging population. However, doctoral students need a variety of supports to complete PhDs and become gerontological social work faculty. This study explored one program's role in supporting the development of social work doctoral students to faculty in gerontology. An email invitation was sent to all former participants (2010-2016 cohorts) of the Association for Gerontology Education in Social Work (AGE*SW)* Pre-Dissertation Fellows Program (PDFP). The 38-question online survey consisted of Likert-type scales, multiple answers, and one open-ended question per section about the program's impacts on their academic career development in teaching, research, mentoring, and support. Forty-five respondents, representing all six cohorts, completed the survey. More than half reported that the PDFP contributed to their ability to publish their research (64.4%, n=29), grow their professional network (86.7%, n=39, and teach (55.5%, n=25). Doctoral programs provided different experiences than the PDFP, including mentoring, methodological training, professional development, networking, and peer support. Results suggest the PDFP provides content recipients value that supplements instruction received in their institutions. The program's ability to connect students to each other and to national leaders enhances their career development and socialization into academic roles.

Introduction

Doctoral education is the primary training mechanism for the social work faculty pipeline (Fong, 2014). While Doctorate in Social Work (DSW) programs emphasize advanced clinical or macro training for practicing social workers (Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education in Social Work, n.d.), PhD programs in social work aim to develop scholars who add to the scientific knowledge that informs social work practice and teach at all levels of social work education (Goodman, 2015). Previous studies have explored how PhD students in social work move through their research-focused doctoral education (Austin, 2002; Davis, Wladkowski, & Mirick, 2017; Fong, 2014; Gardner, 2009; Mendenhall, 2007) and several studies conceptualize students as moving through stages from beginning scholarly activity to stewardship of social work as an academic discipline (Fong, 2014; Gardner, 2009; Mendenhall, 2007). At least half of doctoral social work students report that they intend to pursue an academic position (Anastas & Kuerbis, 2009), and in 2017, 64.5% of PhD graduates secured a faculty or academic research position (Council on Social Work Education, 2018). We use the terms doctoral to refer to PhD students in this paper, and acknowledge that while DSW students are also doctoral students their focus and their needs are likely different.

In 2013, the Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education in Social Work (GADE) established quality guidelines for doctoral education in social work. The task force identified core and advanced outcomes in the areas of research and teaching, and identified the role of PhDs in social work as "stewards of the discipline" (Harrington, Petr, Black, Cunningham-Williams, & Bentley, 2014, p 282) whose tasks should include creating and disseminating new knowledge in the field (Goodman, 2015; Harrington, Petr, Black, Cunningham-Williams, & Bentley, 2014). Much of the existing research on doctoral education examines the structure,

student experience, and outcomes such as time to degree (Pifer & Baker, 2016), yet very little research examines how doctoral students in social work make the transition from PhD students to faculty members.

Doctoral programs may provide students with opportunities for socialization into academic roles through activities such as assisting with teaching or research, attending workshops, or editing student-run journals; access to mentors; and guidance in connecting to a broader network of peers that share similar research interests (Choy, Delahaye, & Saggers, 2015; Dougherty, Fields, & Schuman, 2017; Danso & Aalgaard, 2019; Hopwood, 2010). This nexus of a student's own doctoral program and the influence of other researchers, such as through national conferences, contributes to the development of the doctoral student's academic career. The purpose of this study was to understand the influence of one program presented annually at a national conference on the development of the academic careers of the doctoral student participants.

The Development of Doctoral Students for Faculty Careers

Preparation for Teaching

The transition from PhD student into teacher is described as "a delicate balancing act, teetering between several identities, and managing competing priorities... preparing for a career in academia" (Bailey, Bogossian, & Akesson, 2016, p. 74). Many doctoral students report learning how to teach through experience, with little advance training on how to establish classroom authority, how to develop their teaching style, and how their teaching fits into the broader social work education (Oktay, Jacobson, & Fisher, 2013). The extent and quality of training on instruction available to doctoral social work students varies widely. In some programs, students take courses on pedagogy and/or participate in faculty-led teaching

practicums. Yet in many other programs, doctoral students must direct their own teacher training. Those students may seek practical routes like volunteering as teaching assistants, or serving as adjunct instructors, or seek training by soliciting advice from more experienced teachers, or pursuing elective coursework on teaching (Bailey et al., 2016; O'Leary, 2015).

Students across disciplines report wanting more formal training and mentoring on teaching (Valentine et al., 1998; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine, 2018). In the absence of these opportunities, many - social work doctoral graduates struggle as they step into teaching positions (Pryce, Ainbinder, Werner-Lin, Browne, & Smithgall, 2011). Doctoral students who attended programs offering a teaching group, workshop, or course felt more prepared to meet the educational needs of their social work students than students whose programs did not offer these services (Bailey et al., 2016; Oktay et al., 2013; Pryce et al., 2011).

Mentorship for Academia

Mentorship is an important component of students' graduate school experiences (Lunsford, 2012), as mentoring relationships for professional development are common in doctoral programs (Clark, Harden & Johnson, 2000). Effective mentorship is associated with positive outcomes for doctoral students (Lunsford, 2012; Mirick, Davis, & Wladkowski, 2017), such as research and writing productivity, connections to larger networks, greater self-efficacy, program completion, and job placement (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Haggard, Dougherty, Turban, & Wilbanks, 2011; Paglis, Green & Bauer, 2006). Doctoral students may experience several types of mentoring in their program. For example, an academic advisor may oversee the completion of academic tasks as they progress through program requirements (Baker & Griffin, 2010), while, for many students in the dissertation phase, their committee chair manages all aspects of their research project (Berger, 2015). Lee (2008) identified five domains of doctoral supervision:

functional, enculturation, critical thinking, emancipation, and relationship development. There are many opportunities to guide students in these domains, but not everyone in a position to provide guidance will take on a mentoring role (Jones et al., 2013), highlighting the need for specific mentorship opportunities.

In a study by Mirick, Davis, & Wladkowski (2017), 215 social work PhD graduates were surveyed about the challenges and needed support for conducting research with human subjects. Results highlight the role of the dissertation committee in their research training with most reported feeling content with their committee experiences while others described unsupportive or negative, and at the worst, distressing or emotionally abusive relationships (Mirick et al, 2017). The doctoral experience can impact a student's academic and research career, even beyond the completion of their doctoral program (Mirick et al., 2017). This highlights the need for the availability of outside support opportunities. More recently, Mirick, Davis, & Wladkowski (2019) examined the role of dissertation chairs in social work (n=150) and found chairs took on many roles outside the dissertation itself, including socialization to academia, motivation, and psychosocial and family support. However, there was wide variation in chairs' beliefs about the scope of their role. Many noted challenges regarding how to provide psychosocial support and cited a lack of formal training on mentoring. It is important for gerontological social work doctoral students to have strong mentoring to advance the field of social workers in aging.

Cohort Model of Peer Support

Previous research on doctoral education indicates creating an intentional safe space for learning such as an educational cohort results in successful doctoral learning outcomes (De Lange, Pillay, & Chikoko, 2011). Specifically, cohort models have been found to aid doctoral students in self-reflection, support, and supervision, and result in better doctoral program

completion outcomes (De Lange, Pillay, & Chikoko, 2011). Choy, Delahaye, and Saggers (2015) reported on a cohort model that included four ongoing activities (workshops, a student learning community, research scholarship, and outside learning opportunities) created in partnership between students and faculty. Findings revealed the model yielded a nurturing and positive environment for students (Choy, Delahaye, & Saggers, 2015). Students who connect with peers in their specific research area outside of their institutions can gain additional networking and collaboration opportunities.

Association for Gerontology Education in Social Work (AGE*SW*)

The Association for Gerontology Education in Social Work (AGE*SW*) was established in 1981 to advance aging topics in social work education (Sanders, Anderson, Berg-Weger, Kaplan, & Schroepfer, 2017). The overall mission of AGE*SW* is to ensure older adults and their families attain and maintain a high quality of health and well-being. AGE*SW* has approximately 175 members across the United States and abroad (Sanders et al., 2017). Through collaborations with the interdisciplinary Gerontological Society of America (GSA) and The Association of Baccalaureate Social Work Program Directors (BPD) Association, AGE*SW* informs, assists, and mentors social work educators on aging-related topics.

Developing Faculty in Gerontological Education

One of AGE*SW*'s goals is "preparing social work doctoral students with an interest in gerontology for a career in academia" (Sanders et al., 2017, p. 330). Schools of Social Work awarded 358 doctoral degrees in 2014-2015 (CSWE, 2016). However, without conducting additional analysis (see Lubben & Harootyan, 2003), it is difficult to determine how many of these graduating scholars had a focus on aging as part of their research and teaching agenda. A

primary way AGE*SW* approaches its goal of preparing doctoral student researchers for an aging-related career in academia is through the Pre-Dissertation Fellows Program (PDFP).

       The Hartford Pre-Dissertation Program was one of five programs of the Geriatric Social Work Initiative. Other programs included the Faculty Scholars Program, the Doctoral Fellows Program, the Partnership Program in Aging Education (HPPAE), and the Gero-Rich/Gero-Ed Center program which focused on curriculum infusion (Robbins & Rieder, 2003). Also funded by the John A. Hartford Foundation was the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE)'s SAGE-SW (Strengthening Aging and Gerontology Education in Social Work (SAGE-SW), which ran from 1999-2004. The name changed to CSWE National Center for Gerontological Social Work Education in 2004. All of these programs were developed to better prepare faculty and social work students in the field of gerontology. While the Doctoral Fellows Program was created to grow the pool of future faculty in gerontology (Lubben & Harootyan, 2003), the Hartford Pre-Dissertation Program was founded to grow the pool of scholars eligible for the Doctoral Fellows Program (Lubben, personal communication, 2019). AGE*SW's* PDFP was started in 2010 and modeled after Hartford's Pre-Dissertation Program that ran from 2006-2010, administered by the Gerontological Society of America.

       The AGE*SW* PDFP trains doctoral social work students in gerontological social work research and education (Sanders et al., 2017), with intentional support through various training and networking opportunities. The PDFP provides educational sessions to expand the specific knowledge and skills of doctoral students to allow them to succeed in gerontological social work research and education (Sanders et al., 2017; Mauldin et al., in review; Gibson et al., in press). As of 2017, the program has awarded fellowships to 74 doctoral students representing 42 different social work doctoral programs (Sanders et al., 2017). PDFP participants are provided

mentorship and professional development training by social work faculty and other experts from around the United States. Workshop topics include navigating the dissertation, using secondary data, quantitative and qualitative approaches to research, publishing, the role of teaching, networking and resources, working with mentors, creating a plan for funding support, and post-graduation planning. Students participate in these workshops as a cohort in the year of their fellowship. An alumni reception at the GSA Annual Scientific Meeting allows previous cohorts to connect with one another and the new cohort of students. However, the role of participating in this program on an academic career has not been explored. For more information about AGE*SW* and the PDFP program, please see Sanders et al. (2017) or visit http://www.agesw.org.

This study examined the role of the PDFP in the career development of program participants. This paper augments findings from Gibson et al. (in press), which analyzes results of evaluation surveys completed immediately after program completion. In this manuscript, we present results from a retrospective survey of PDFP alumni, many of whom were several years post-graduation at the time the survey was administered. Findings from this survey can inform social work doctoral programs, AGE*SW*, and other academic mentorship programs on ways to improve support for gerontological social work scholars.

Methods

To better understand the significance of the PDFP in the career development of participating gerontological social work doctoral students, this project had two specific research questions. First, how is the content in the program unique or similar to that being taught in participants' home doctoral programs? Second, how does participation in the program affect participants' career development in the longer term?

Sampling

All members of the 2010 to 2016 cohorts of the PDFP were recruited for this study. At the time of their participation in the PDFP, all were enrolled in social work doctoral programs in the United States. These previous participants were identified using a list of PDFP alumni maintained by AGE*SW* leadership and shared with the research team for this study. Research team members reviewed the list and attempted to locate program alumni whose contact information was unknown or had changed, through search engines and social networks. Of the 74 previous participants, the team was able to identify contact information for 73.

The survey was designed by the research team and included content on PDFP aims and workshop topics, measures of academic success such as publication, funding, and degree completion, and topics such as the post-PhD job search. Survey questions gathered both quantitative and qualitative data related to participants' experiences in teaching, quantitative and qualitative research, and publishing; the usefulness of program information on career development; information regarding current and past employment status; and their career trajectory since program participation.

Procedures

PDFP leadership sent out an email on behalf of the research team inviting participants to take part in a one-time, voluntary, anonymous survey. A one-time reminder was sent out two weeks after the initial email. Data were collected using Qualtrics survey software. Study procedures were approved by the Institutional Review Boards of all institutions of the authors.

Analysis

Quantitative data were analyzed using SPSS 22.0 and descriptive statistics (e.g., frequencies) are reported. Not all questions were answered by all participants so percentages are reported as the percent of the total sample. Open-ended responses were transferred to Microsoft

Word for analysis. An open coding process was used to determine the primary themes in the participants' responses and then codes were grouped together as overarching themes were recognized (Creswell, 2018). The first and third authors coded the data separately in Microsoft Word by reviewing all open-ended answers. The two authors then met and discussed any areas of disagreement until consensus was reached. Final codes represent consensus on all items. Some of the research team were alumni of the PDFP and to minimize impact of the shared experiences, researchers engaged in ongoing dialogue at all stages of this study with a non-alumna (Creswell & Poth, 2018; Rubin & Rubin, 2012), including but not limited to research question creation, survey development, data collection, analysis, and write-up.

Results

Sample Description

Forty-five of the 74 past participants responded to the survey, a response rate of 60%. Since response rates to online only surveys are seldom more than 20% (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2014), this was considered to be an extremely positive response. Table 1 illustrates the professional characteristics of the sample. Study respondents participated in the AGE*SW* PDFP across all years the program was offered, 2010 to 2016 (*n=45*). A majority (70%) indicated they had non-academic work experience in aging. Since participation in the PDFP, 33% of respondents indicated they had graduated and currently hold faculty positions in academia (tenure track, clinical, and field). Another 15% of respondents were in the process of applying for faculty positions in academia. Nearly half (42%) reported they successfully received financial support for dissertation research in gerontology and about 62% had teaching experience in aging since participating in the PDFP. Nearly all respondents (90%) indicated their dissertation

research involved older adults and 86% reported they plan to engage in work that impacts older

adults as part of their future research agenda.

[Insert Table 1 about here.]

Influence of Individual Doctoral Programs

The PDFP alumni reported their individual doctoral programs provided a range of

experiences for social work PhD students, including mentoring and methodological training,

professional development activities and additional resources, and networking and peer support.

Mentoring and methodological training. Professional development through mentoring

and methodological training was available doctoral students within their own programs, even

though programs used differing models. Nearly 27% (n=12) of respondents reported their mentor

was assigned to them whereas about 64% (n=29) indicated they were able to choose their

mentor. Participants received methodological training in quantitative methods (73.3%),

qualitative methods (68.9%), and mixed methods (26.7%).

Professional development activities and additional resources. Additional resources

from their doctoral programs reported by participants included professional development

activities such as curriculum vitae writing (42.2%, n=19), job talk preparation (51.1%, n=23),

interviewing skills (20.0%, n=9), networking skills/advice (37.8%, n=17), writing and publishing

support (51.1%, n=23), and job searching (35.6%, n=16). Respondents also indicated they

received teacher training/support (51.1%, n=23), training/support for external funding/proposal

development (48.9%, n=22), encouragement to apply or join professional organizations like

AGE*SW* (60.0%, n=27), and peer support groups or peer mentors (37.8%, n=17).

Networking and peer support. Professional networking support was provided by the

student's doctoral program in a variety of ways including ongoing formal mentoring (13.3%,

n=6), assistance with job search (31.1%, n=13), letters of recommendation (13.3%, n=6), research collaboration opportunities (33.3%, n=15) and writing and/or publishing opportunities (35.6%, n=16). Respondents also reported receiving formal peer support in the areas of assistance with job search (26.7%, n=12), research collaboration opportunities (13.3%, n=6), writing and/or publishing opportunities (13.3%, n=6), as well as social media groups (6.7%, n=3). Beyond support for academic/professional matters, students reported receiving support from their cohort/peers (57.8%, n=26), faculty members (46.7%, n=21), online/social media networks (15.6%, n=7), and professional networks (35.6%, n=16).

Influence of and Activities Since the AGE*SW* PDFP

The PDPF program and PDPF activities held after the initial session were factors that contributed to participants' learning and development. Nearly all respondents *(n=42)* answered at least one of the open-ended questions specific to the PDFP's influence on teaching, qualitative and quantitative research methods, publication, and networking which are presented here.

Teaching. Content about teaching was added to the PDFP's workshops after the first two cohorts. Nonetheless, 59.5% (n=25) of respondents indicated they somewhat or definitely agreed that the PDFP content had contributed to their ability to teach. Responses suggest that, when it was offered, content centered more on approaches to teaching as an aspect of faculty development, rather than on the mechanics of teaching. One participant said, *"I feel that [the PDFP] provided a sense of "what to expect" and perhaps just normalization of teaching as part the academic career."*

The PDFP also influenced the way respondents thought about their role as an instructor. For those who had not taught yet, this content was even more valued. One participant shared, *"I often reflect on [redacted]'s presentation on teaching - I retained my notes from that*

presentation and used them when teaching independently for the first time." Another echoed,

"Discussion we had in the [PDFP] prepared me well for the teaching since I had no idea about

teaching before the program." Peers also contributed content to others' classes and *"...provided*

many opportunities to learn what others were doing and incorporate that into my teaching."

Research methods. Half of the respondents (50%) reported that the PDFP had

contributed somewhat or definitely to their ability to conduct quantitative research. Respondents

reflected that both program content and discussion with faculty presenters and PDFP peers

helped to conceptualize their dissertation and other research questions. One said, *"The [PDFP]*

did not contribute to my analysis methods, but did contribute to how I conceptualize research

questions." Another mentioned the contributions of their cohort, as well as other previous pre-

dissertation program participants, saying, *"Discussing research design with peers and faculty*

opened new perspectives for me. Several former [PDFP] cohort members were particularly

insightful and helpful with how best to measure outcomes for a study I was preparing." Also,

being able to discuss with similar minded peers helped students shape their research questions,

"As with teaching, networking with other alumni offered greater exposure to a wider variety of

methodologies that have informed my research." Students who had been discouraged from using

qualitative methods by their doctoral programs found support in PDFP, as this participant shared,

"I was encouraged to find that many of the [PDFP] instructors and alumni were positive about

the impact of qualitative research and had good suggestions for how to get that kind of work

published."

Publication. Information about publishing research and understanding the publishing

process were an important contribution of the PDFP with 69.0% (n=29) of respondents reporting

that they somewhat or definitely agreed the AGE*SW* program contributed to their learning in this

area. One participant said, *"I advocate for continual de-mystification of the publication process and I think people are afraid to admit how little we all know about it."* Participants also found the content on publishing helpful with clarifying the process, which helped participants think about their publishing goals as stated here, *"I benefitted from advice about targeting journals for publication and hearing directly from the editor of [redacted] as part of the [PDFP]."* Finally, additional instruction around publishing decreased feelings of intimidation about contacting journals, as this participant shared, *"I also learned you can ask questions directly to journals' editorial leadership!"*

Networking. The professional network is seen as a way to foster research collaborations and mentoring, and 92.8% (n=39) reported they somewhat or definitely agreed the program expanded their professional network with both faculty and other students in the aging field. One said, *"I think I know everyone that is faculty in gerontological social work. I can't go to the GSA meeting without seeing a million familiar faces."* Students whose programs had few students or faculty interested in aging really saw the value in these networks as shared here, *"I have gotten a great deal of social support from this program, which I haven't really gotten from my own school at times. There are few students/faculty who are interested in aging research so this was a valuable resource."* Some did not realize the extent of this network until they attended other social work conferences as this person said, *"I realized that I have a good network when I saw many people I got to know in the program at the SSWR [Society for Social Work Research} annual meeting."*

PDFP networks were useful in shaping development as a faculty member by illuminating the many parts of a faculty position, and providing specific guidance on teaching content.

"The [PDFP] helped me with understanding aspects of careers in higher education, skills and steps toward achieving my professional goals, and opportunities to network and learn from other participants who have continued to inform my understanding of the field of gerontological social work, including providing recommendations for texts and readings that I use in my classes."

Participants crystallized the extent of the personal and professional value of these networks from the PDFP, such as this participant:

"I have met so many people because of the [PDFP], including people far along in their careers who have been kind and helpful mentors, alumni who have offered great advice regarding how to best build a foundation as an academic scholar, and students that I have kept in touch with over the years."

Another shared,

"I think that the 'crown jewel' of the [PDFP] is the leadership's desire and ability to expose awardees to gerontological social work researchers from throughout the country. ... creating an environment where we can get to know other awardees as a cohort while meeting other emerging and established scholars is a fantastic benefit that I greatly appreciate and plan to give back to myself."

Overall, the impact of networking was clear from participants through their dissertation and beyond as well as the potential to 'pay it forward' to future doctoral students.

[Insert Table 2 about here.]

Engagement in activities since participating in the PDFP. A majority of all respondents (n=45) reported they engaged in quantitative research (75.0%) and qualitative research (73.0%) since participating in the PDFP. Even more (82.2%) reported they had

published in an academic journal. Almost 67% indicated they sought financial support for dissertation research in gerontology since their participation in the PDFP. Approximately 93.3% of respondents indicate they have taught since participating in the PDFP.

Discussion

This research found that many former PDFP participants have successfully achieved a variety of doctoral education goals such as dissertation funding, graduation, and obtaining faculty jobs. It is also clear that the alumni perceived the program as valuable and helpful as they worked toward their professional goals. Past participants reported feeling supported by the networks they developed within their PDFP cohorts, with other pre-dissertation alumni, and with gerontological social work faculty that they met through AGE*SW* and the PDFP. This further supports existing research that shows that support in one's PhD program can supplement the support from a PhD program, professional development, and successful completion of doctoral studies (Crisp & Cruz, 2009; Haggard, Dougherty, Turban, & Wilbanks, 2011; Paglis, Green & Bauer, 2006).

Social work students in research-based PhD programs, prepare to enter research-focused positions, often in academia (Anastas, 2012). Many social workers and other clinicians enter PhD programs after having had practice experience but not necessarily academic experience, and being socialized into academia is an important part of the doctoral training process (Helm, Campa, & Moretto, 2012). This research highlights that while doctoral programs socialize their students through research training, formal mentoring, and specific professional development training, programs like the PDFP provide experiences that supplement content at students' university PhD programs.

Our findings suggest that both institutional PhD programs and external programs like PDFP can complement each other in how they contribute to the development of skills and resources necessary for doctoral students to be successful as faculty members. These skills— qualitative and quantitative research, funding, publication, and network building—are required for a successful transition from doctoral studies to social work faculty positions, and students learning them from various sources is an important value added. In particular, the PDFP's value as a complement to PhD program offerings was its ability to provide information and networking opportunities specific to the field of aging. The field of social work is broad and encompasses diverse populations, modalities, and emphases across micro, mezzo, and macro practice. Specialized fellowships such as PDFP can support doctoral students' individualized development in their chosen areas of research and practice, and may be particularly helpful in ensuring that students are connected to a strong network of colleagues in their substantive area.

Implications for Doctoral Education and Mentoring

Ideally, doctoral programs will provide their students with all of the content necessary for successful completion and transition into faculty members: instruction on qualitative and quantitative methods, content on applying for funding, mentorship on the job search process including CV development, publishing, and interviewing, and teaching development opportunities. Currently, students report that not every program offers all of these, and formal mentors often lack the time and the training to do all that is expected of them in these roles. A program like the AGE*SW* Pre-Dissertation Fellows Program can fill some of these gaps for students and facilitate some of the national networking that should be occurring at conferences.

Through this program, participants are directly introduced to national leaders in gerontological social work in a smaller, more intimate setting and are given the opportunity to

ask questions directly of them. Such interactions break down some of the social barriers that exist between students and senior faculty members in other settings. These interactions may also create mentoring relationships external to a PhD student's home institution.

While there are limits to what programs like PDFP can be for students, they can serve an important role in building connections and networks among others in the gerontological social work field, acclimatizing students to academic culture, and through this, contribute to professional development for an emerging career.

Study Limitations

There are a number of limitations to consider from this study. PDFP participants were the only study respondents, and there was no comparison group. Data collected about participants' reported perceptions, beliefs, and skills are cross-sectional, and participants were asked to reflect retrospectively on the PDFP and doctoral education training. Time since participation in PDFP varied, ranging from a year ago to eight years ago. Further, not all former participants responded to survey invitations (the study response rate was 61.6%), possibly leading to selection bias in who chose to respond to the survey. All the respondents who had graduated were currently in faculty positions. It is possible that PDFP participants who did not complete their doctoral education or did not enter academia may have been less likely to complete the survey due to perceived social desirability of responses. Additionally, this study did not explore factors such as race, gender, or age, as these could have made respondents personally identifiable given what information is known about former participants.

Suggestions for Future Studies

What remains unclear is the specific role the PDFP had in contributing to these successes. Future research should continue to evaluate the impact of mentorship programs like AGE*SW*'s

PDFP, for example, by using network analyses to examine the impact of networks formed through the PDFP, to determine the broader reach of the program on gerontological social work academics. For example, does one only benefit if they are a PDFP participant, or is there a secondary effect on network connections where someone who knows a PDFP participant benefits from the participant's network connections? If so, how do such benefits influence the secondary person's professional development?

Future studies might also examine professional values in academia. For example, while PhD programs can teach the methodology to conduct a systematic review, it is also important to see how high quality, rigorous systematic reviews are viewed within social work research. An understanding of what values are shared among scholars can help to advance students' socialization into the community of social work scholars.

Conclusion

Despite efforts that began over four decades ago, there continues to be a growing need for gerontological social workers, gerontological social work educators, and aging-focused social work research. Challenges continue for social workers in completing research-focused PhD degrees in social work, especially in the field of aging. Professional networks like AGE*SW* and doctoral training programs like the PDFP can assist students in receiving additional support that can contribute to one's likelihood of completing a PhD and successfully navigating the transition to emerging scholar.

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