

DSW 2.0: Revamped Advanced Social Work Degree Gains Traction

BY PETER CRAIG

Since Oasis of Hope Hospital in Tijuana, Mexico, engages in a lot of social outreach programs, CEO Daniel E. Kennedy decided to expand his management skills by pursuing a doctor in social work (DSW) degree at USC's Suzanne Dworak-Peck School of Social Work—and is glad he did. Among other things, he says, “classes like ‘Executive Leadership’ and ‘Community Public Communication’ have let me bring so much knowledge back to my current job and make improvements in the way we do things.”

The DSW degree has recently gained traction in social work academia. Decades ago, the social work doctoral degree at many universities was the DSW degree, but, for enhanced status and recognition, it ultimately morphed into the PhD degree, says Dr. Jacqueline Corcoran, LCSW, DSW director at the University of Pennsylvania's School of Social Policy and Practice. Then in 2007, Penn dusted off the original name and created a “new doctoral degree that was more clinically focused and for advanced practitioners in the field,” says Corcoran.

Differences in Focus

Today, the usual DSW degree model remains advanced clinical but there's plenty of variation, a lot of it around leadership and educator training. DSW student Gwendolyne Tuttle, LCSW, clinical coordinator at the Cornerstones of



Barry University DSW students and social work professors at the inaugural Capstone Showcase Doctoral Symposium in August 2022.

Maine transitional-living center, came to Penn for its strong emphasis on psychoanalysis—“pretty rare in social work,” she says—and research. Simmons University's more recent DSW program is particularly heavy on social justice, says Program Director Dr. Jacqueline T. Dyer. “I

made sure it was infused in every single clinical and administrative course we have to create a unique and comprehensive experience.”

For the four-year-old DSW program at Barry University in Florida, the main focus is on advanced trauma-informed leadership and practice, according to

Dr. Mitchell Rosenwald, professor and director of doctoral studies. Students take clinical, administrative and community-focused courses related to trauma, whether individual or historically shared (as in racism or poverty).

And while most DSW programs mandate that



PHOTO BY JEFF JOHNSON-CURRY



TOP LEFT: USC professor Jane James, MSW (bottom row, far right), facilitates a DSW Zoom class in March. BOTTOM LEFT: Dr. Tamara J. Cadet, LICSW, MPH, welcomes Penn DSW students to an on-campus immersion session in August 2022, attended by DSW Director Dr. Jacqueline Corcoran (far right). TOP RIGHT: As part of his capstone project, USC DSW student Daniel E. Kennedy films three-time suicide survivor Alissa for his documentary "Heal the Disconnect."

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applicants have an MSW, USC’s is interdisciplinary, with its students simply needing a master’s, says Dr. Jennifer Lewis, associate professor and director of the MSW and DSW programs. “We value the different

perspectives on some of these big, deep-seated, systemic problems such as racism that we don’t believe social workers can solve in isolation.” That structure could change in a few years, as the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) is pilot-testing DSW degree accreditation that will surely require students to have an MSW. One possibility USC is considering, says Lewis, is having the DSW degree for social work students and a related certificate for other disciplines.

A chief reason for the resurgence of the DSW degree has been to match the introduction of practice doctorates in other health professions such as

occupational therapy and physical therapy, not only to “have a seat at the table” in health care settings such as decision making and treatment planning, say Rosenwald and Corcoran, but also in competing for high-level jobs.

Capstone or Dissertation

One element that DSW programs share is a culminating project, whether it’s called a “capstone” or, in the case of the more research-oriented DSW programs, a dissertation. For example, at Simmons, one recent DSW grad’s capstone project involved designing an MSW course to help

students understand “smart decarceration” (see “Simmons University: DSW Caps Profound Life Change” on page 12). At USC, Kennedy is making a series of films to test different ways of informing Hispanic parents about how best to engage with their teenage daughters on the risk of suicide. At Barry University, recent grad Dr. Maria Silva’s capstone project was “Trauma-Informed Self-Care in Hospital Settings: A Post-COVID Necessity.” And at Penn, Tuttle will be working on a dissertation called “Understanding the Experience of BIPOC Patients with Borderline Personality Disorder in Mentalization Based

Treatment with a White Therapist: A Pilot Study.”

In her studies so far, Tuttle says she has particularly benefited from learning “how to effectively and carefully evaluate existing research so I can enhance my own practice and that of my supervisees.” And overall in social work, she adds, “a doctoral degree is really superior to a master’s-level degree if you’re looking to pursue a career in a leadership position as a clinical director or executive director.”

The DSW degree represents a growth industry within social work academia, with program introduction only likely to pick up speed when CSWE offers accreditation in a few years. There are currently just under 30 DSW programs, but Barry University’s Rosenwald predicts a tremendous expansion of program options in the decades to come: “They’ll be popping up like popcorn in your microwave.” 🍿



Members of the Class of 2022: Barry University’s first DSW degree grads.

Simmons University: DSW Caps Profound Life Change

Dr. Yehudah Pryce, senior director of the National Mental Health and Well-being Program at Defy Ventures in Los Angeles, talks about his journey from prison inmate to social worker.



Tell us a little about your background.

I served over 16 years in prison, arrested as a teenager for a nonviolent crime, but the way I perceived social workers was that they didn’t really understand anything about me or how I was experiencing my life. Later, I worked in prison chapel, and after interacting with other incarcerated people and seeing how they were receptive to some of the things I was posing to them, I felt like social work might actually be a realistic path forward for me once I got out of prison.

What happened next?

While incarcerated I worked toward a bachelor’s in sociology with an emphasis on social welfare. Later, I completed it at Adams State University. Then I enrolled in the University of Southern California MSW program, where I became chair of Unchained Scholars, a student organization for people with

incarceration experience studying social work. I was also a program manager at Turning Point, working with homeless people in Los Angeles.

Why did you choose Simmons University for your DSW?

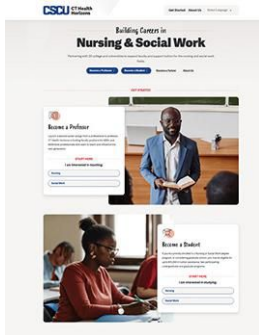
I liked its three key components—becoming an advanced-level clinician, leader and educator. My master identity had been inmate, parolee, criminal—and I was anxious to establish a new identity as quickly as possible.

Please describe your capstone project.

I created an online MSW course on smart decarceration—one of the 13 Grand Challenges—to introduce students to the history of mass incarceration in the U.S., factors that contribute to its perpetuation and how to reduce recidivism. It includes not just using people with incarceration experience as a prop, as subject matter or as “the other,” but as subject matter *experts*. 🍿

CT HEALTH HORIZONS

Building Connecticut's Behavioral Health Workforce



CT Health Horizons' informative website: www.ct.edu/cthealth.

As the entire country faces a social worker shortage, the state of Connecticut has a new plan to do something about theirs. CT (Connecticut) Health Horizons is a three-year, \$35 million initiative being funded by the state, with aid from the federal American Rescue Plan Act, to help reverse declines in both the nursing and behavioral health workforces, says Alice

Pritchard, PhD, chief of staff and chief strategy officer of CSCU (Connecticut State Colleges & Universities).

CSCU—comprising Connecticut's 12 community colleges, four of its state universities and Charter Oak State College—has formed an advisory committee with the University of Connecticut, the independent college associations and the state Office of Workforce Strategy to distribute the funds evenly and fairly among nursing

and behavioral health higher-ed programs around the state, Pritchard says. There are three categories: tuition assistance, faculty expansion, and promoting innovation through partnerships with state or private agencies.

In one such partnership, for example, Southern Connecticut State University and Yale New Haven Health are working with Clifford Beers Community Care Center and Cornell Scott-Hill Health Center to line up field placements for MSW students at the two agencies, says CT Health Horizons Project Director Nestor Leon. At the same time, staffers at Clifford Beers and Cornell Scott-Hill can both serve as instructors and join Southern Connecticut State's MSW program themselves. "It's a pilot program, and it's going to test the strategy for expanding clinical placement and increasing employee retention," Leon says.

Outreach-wise, he says, some money is going toward social media, social influencers, billboards and other venues to inform interested students and diverse communities about pathways into nursing and social work. (For more information about CT Health Horizons, visit ct.edu/cthealth.)



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