

CHAPTER 5: RESEARCH



Research Forum 2011



Weaving Research into MSW Curriculum and Practice

Developing Research Leaders

“What is
research, but a
blind date with
knowledge?”
--Will Henry

The School aims to help students develop the mindset of a researcher—one that is objective, inquisitive, and committed to basing practice on evidence. We weave research content throughout the fabric of our curriculum in order for students to learn how to be research leaders, using research to inform practice, and practice to inform research. We teach students to conduct library database research, use analytical skills, critically think about research content, apply research to practice and practice to research, critique research findings, empirically propose research studies, develop and implement research designs, and finally conduct their own research studies. Because faculty members are engaged in research endeavors, they serve as role models to students, including students in research projects so that they acquire expertise in conducting research. We expose students to research throughout our curriculum.



EDUCATIONAL POLICY 2.1.6—Engage in research-informed practice and practice-informed research. Social workers use practice experience to inform research, employ evidence-based interventions, evaluate their own practice, and use research findings to improve practice, policy, and social service delivery. Social workers comprehend quantitative and qualitative research and understand scientific and ethical approaches to building knowledge.

Social workers use practice experience to inform scientific inquiry, and use research evidence to inform practice.

Research Courses. Our MSW program offers two courses in the formal research sequence, one (SOWK 5317 Social Work Research) for foundation students, and one (SOWK 5323 Advanced Social Work Research: Program and Practice Evaluation) for concentration students. Both courses integrate statistical knowledge; therefore, statistics is a prerequisite for admission to the MSW program.

Several
Advanced
Research
students
conducted a
program
evaluation using
secondary data
from Municipal
Court, exploring
how homeless
defendants fared
in deferred
disposition cases.
They conducted
demographic and
correlational
statistical
analyses; they
created a variable
that measured
success. They
found that
community
courts help
bridge the gap
between the
criminal justice
system and the
social welfare
needs of the
homeless.

■ **SOWK 5317 Social Work Research** builds scientific research skills by helping foundation students develop critical thinking, knowledge of program and practice evaluation, and a philosophy of social work practice. The course prepares students to read, interpret, and critique research with skepticism and rigor and to adequately perform a variety of research roles and activities. When students complete the course, they can use research to inform the selection of intervention methods, design scientific research inquiry by applying research concepts, ethically examine and assess research knowledge and its uses and limitations for vulnerable populations, critically and creatively think about research-informed practice, identify the gaps in this knowledge, and incorporate new research knowledge into practice.

■ **SOWK 5323 Advanced Social Work Research** instructs concentration students about advanced knowledge and skills of how to systematically evaluate programs and practice. It enhances effective and ethical social work practice by teaching students to design, implement, and empirically assess programs and interventions. The course is open only to concentration students who have completed all foundation courses, and provides a forum in which both Administrative Leadership and Direct Practice students can share insights and experiences. Students who complete the course can define and apply measurement, apply ethical research methods, conduct needs assessments, apply organized and creative problem-solving in single and group-level research design, demonstrate working knowledge of applied research to address specific needs of clients, conduct quantitative and qualitative methods, and integrate research methods in direct practice and program evaluation to refine professional practice.

Leaders Apply Research to Practice

Our research courses include material and assignments on both qualitative and quantitative methods. We present a broad array of research methods, and ways to apply research to practice so that practice is more effective. This ensures that students have a broad and descriptive knowledge of how research and practice fit together, from both coursework and field placements. A major element of this learning includes teaching students to evaluate practice. Acquiring skills requires a firm understanding of research methods, facility in critique and critical thinking, skill in using research language and terminology, and ability to apply research to practice to inform best practices. Thus, we integrate research into all coursework, especially practice and field, through interviewing skills, assessment, data collection, and analysis for final verbal and written presentation of information.

Students in
Advanced
Research may
complement their
work with a
creative
component.
Arnie, one of our
more memorable
students, donned
a beret and an
army green Che
Guevara t-shirt,
and delivered a
poem about
research—with
funk playing in
the background.
His poem
contained such
memorable
phrases as
“Research, I spit
on you” and
“Come on,
Research, Make
My Day!” Arnie
ended his poem
with, “Research,
you complete
me.”

- In **SOWK 5317 Research**, foundation MSW students complete specific skill development assignments (readings, critiques, exercises, and papers) across the full range of "stages" in the research cycle for both qualitative and quantitative methods. Students discuss and debate the advantages and disadvantages of qualitative and quantitative methods and their relative strengths for particular types of research questions. Through the research prospectus assignment, students apply their knowledge about qualitative and quantitative methods to a specific social work problem.
- In **SOWK 5323 Advanced Research**, concentration students locate and evaluate best evidence (both quantitative and qualitative) for interventions by critiquing two journal articles using different methodologies. Students learn how qualitative methods can complement quantitative methods and illuminate the variables being measured. In completing their course project assignment, students select from a variety of quantitative and qualitative methods for measuring intervention effectiveness.
- In **SOWK 5323 Advanced Research**, concentration students analyze previously completed needs assessments, identifying and critiquing the use of quantitative and qualitative methods. Students also prepare an original needs assessment plan, using both qualitative and quantitative methods. They discuss case examples of formative and process evaluations using both methods and develop an original program evaluation plan, selecting appropriate methods and providing the rationale for their use.
- In **SOWK 5334 Resource Development**, AL students write a grant that includes an evaluation section. They also conduct a needs assessment, learn to write executive summaries, and learn the nuances of grant-driven resource attainment.

Leaders Actually Do Research

Students engage in research-informed practice and practice-informed research through studying connections between practice, policy, and social service delivery, appreciating how research can strengthen these connections. Students often hear faculty presentations on the research projects that they are conducting, and faculty explain how research, practice, and policy are intertwined. Faculty stress research values and how students can apply values in research. These activities build the competencies of critical thinking and engaging in research-informed practice and practice-informed research.

- Foundation students in **SOWK 5314 Social Work Practice II** undertake a semester-long project in which they apply the scientific approach through carefully conceptualizing and making empirical decisions about a community project. Students find research literature to justify their intervention approach, and develop a comprehensive, systematic evaluation plan.
- In **SOWK 5319 Diagnostic Assessment**, Direct Practice concentration students use research in their case studies to analyze both the efficacy and

the limitations of diagnosis using the DSM-IV. Students also research a specific diagnostic category, including the latest studies done in this area.

Several students in Advanced Research designed a research study to monitor the effectiveness of Fetal Alcohol Syndrome Disorder signage in restrooms. They had some challenges with IRB approval and had to think through informed consent procedures. They also had problems, since most of the students were female, with getting into men's restrooms. And they had to hit all the bars in their target area! It was an exciting project. Dr. Tijerina, an expert in FASD, assisted the students.

- Direct Practice concentration students taking **SOWK 5324 Practice with Families** work in groups to prepare a research-based intervention for working with families.
- Field students conduct psychosocial assessments that must include an assessment component.
- Foundation and concentration students both conduct practice-informed research in their field placements and create a poster to explain the research. Students formally present their posters and research at a Community Research Forum, sponsored by the Field Office and School of Social Work. Community members, faculty, students, field instructors, and field liaisons attend the forum and discuss the research with students. All student posters contain empirical elements of engagement, assessment, intervention, and evaluation, including the research method, any creative components, obstacles, and if students applied for IRB approval/exemption. The forum has had up to 30 students presenting their research.

Leaders Translate Research into Action

Because research informs us about our own practice, we are then prepared to emphasize strengths and address weaknesses, so that the service product we offer to clients is sound. Faculty help students learn to use research to evaluate one's own practice, as well as evaluate service delivery efficacy, intervention effectiveness, and policy usefulness. In courses, we teach students to employ ethical and evidence-based practice interventions which incorporate theory. Here are some teaching activities we use.

- Students complete human subjects institutional review board training and become certified in this research ethics training. This is a requirement for **SOWK 5323 Advanced Research** so that students can conduct the core research study assignment. Some students apply for IRB exemption or approval to conduct research studies in their advanced field placements (**SOWK 5622/5623**).
- Students in **SOWK 5323 Advanced Research** conduct a research study. This is a program evaluation project that requires a literature review, methodology, results, and discussion, with the option of publishing their results.
- We stress the ethical use of scientific inquiry, discussing the Code of Ethics and its emphasis on client confidentiality and protection from harm in practice and research. In any research project involving clients, students must obtain written release from clients.
- Foundation students in **SOWK 5310 Social Work Policy** conduct research on a specific policy and present their findings to the class. They build on this research and analysis in **SOWK 5322 Advanced Policy** in policy reformulation and grassroots advocacy.

Four Advanced
Research
students have
solicited
secondary data
from food banks.
They are
evaluating food
distribution by
analyzing data on
food weight and
types, and on
frequency of
donation. These
students will
contribute their
results to the
food banks for
evaluation and
promotion.

- In **SOWK 5313 Practice I**, foundation students apply key parts of the helping process (data collection, assessment, intervention planning, and evaluation) to individuals, families, and small groups. They practice using self-anchored scales to assess intervention efficacy. Students plan ways of evaluating progress in their individual and family assessments.
- In **SOWK 5326 Direct Practice with Individuals**, Direct Practice concentration students complete two research papers in which they critically analyze and employ research about advanced interventions with individuals.
- Foundation students in **SOWK 5410/5411 Foundation Field** write intervention plans that include evaluation components.
- In **SOWK 5612/5613 Direct Practice Field**, concentration students use research as the base of their theoretical presentations. Their literature reviews focus on evidence-based empirical research about a particular theoretical orientation or intervention strategy. Students complete a comprehensive, integrative paper consisting of an assessment and treatment plan. The assignment includes an evaluation component, in which students demonstrate their abilities to ethically and effectively evaluate clinical treatment.
- Students taking **SOWK 5622/5623 Administrative Leadership Field** complete a research project that helps them understand a key issue in their administrative field placement. They then turn the project into an article they can submit to a professional journal.

Leaders Use Research to Create Change

Research should be the base on which we make change decisions. We integrate research methods and knowledge of critical thinking, data collection and analysis, and application of research to practice throughout the MSW curriculum. In this way, we help students use research to initiate change to improve practice, policy, and service delivery through activities such as those below.

- **SOWK 5313 Foundation Social Work Practice I** requires foundation students to read and incorporate current research articles into all written assignments (e.g., a values paper, case analyses, psychosocial assessment, and a contract). For each proposed intervention, students must indicate how they will evaluate the outcomes of the intervention.
- **SOWK 5314 Foundation Social Work Practice II** blends traditional methods for testing models with innovative action-research evaluation strategies. Students develop an evaluation plan for the macro practice intervention based on the goals and objectives of their target intervention.
- In **SOWK 5323 Advanced Research**, concentration students complete a four-assignment course project to design and implement a single-system research project. The aim is to study change with special populations at the individual, family, or group level.

Two AL students developed a Hip-Hop intervention program, creating goals and logic models. They delivered the intervention at a boot camp for juveniles. In the Advanced Research class, these students joined with a DP student to evaluate the Hip-Hop program, developing a study and acquiring boot camp and IRB exemption. Their analysis of the study data showed that the intervention was effective for their sample. Dr. Travis assisted them.

- **SOWK 5323 Advanced Research** concentration students consider how appropriate empowerment evaluations are for their practice by reading and critiquing case studies about using evaluation as a tool for change.
- Foundation students taking **SOWK 5317 Research** study the concept of "scientist-practitioner" through readings, lecture, and discussion. They consider issues about valid professional knowledge, such as trusting practitioner intuition versus relying on empirical evidence.
- In **SOWK 5314 Foundation Practice II**, foundation students begin a two-semester community intervention project which is continued in their field practicum. Students develop a comprehensive, systematic evaluation plan in the course and present the results of their practice evaluation to their field seminar at the end of the year.
- **SOWK 5326 Direct Practice with Individuals** and **SOWK 5327 Direct Practice with Groups** give Direct Practice concentration students the chance to analyze articles on practice effectiveness and examine strategies they might use in their practice.
- Direct Practice students taking **SOWK 5612/5613 Direct Practice Field** must carry out a research project in their internship that includes collecting, analyzing, and reporting data on their practice interventions. They submit abstracts of their projects to a statewide conference for presentation.

Our Base of Strength in Research

Faculty work with students on research in many ways beyond the classroom through Directed Independent Study courses, research projects, conferences, and other forms of professional development. Here are some examples:

- A strength of the research curriculum is the fact that faculty and students often work together to conduct research. Faculty members include students in their grant activities. Students have worked with Dr. Travis on his Hip-Hop research, with Drs. Deepak and Russell on social networking sites and social capital, and with Dr. Tijerina on Hispanic first-generation student research. Dr. Selber has afforded her interns exceptional opportunities in research and organizing with on-campus services for veterans; several of these graduates are now employed in work with veterans.
- For many years, students completing Directed Independent Study courses or working with faculty members on research projects have presented their work at research forums on and off campus. For instance, a recent MSW graduate worked with Dr. Hawkins and then presented at the International Conference on women's issues in Russia. Another graduate student is working with Dr. Norton on a life history research project on the University's anti-racism peer education program called Interruptions.

Erin, a recent AL graduate, created an information management system for her field placement agency. She created the database and did the analysis. She also created a very successful “Night of Hope” fundraiser for the agency.

- In 2010, three graduate students received Hogg Foundation Fellowships. A current MSW student and scholarship recipient is working with Dr. Tijerina on research around persons with physical challenges.
- Many students, with the mentorship of faculty, have presented their research results at meetings such as the state NASW conference and the CSWE conference. The School helps fund these presentations. For example, a graduate student presented a poster with Dr. Jones on gerontology social work at CSWE, while another MSW student recently presented with Dr. Tijerina at CSWE on first-generation college students. A graduate student presented with Drs. Deepak and Russell at NASW on social networking and social capital, while two other graduate students presented at the 2008 Social Work Action Alliance in Houston.
- A number of graduate students have published articles with faculty in recent years. For example, Natalie Diaz, a recent MSW graduate now working in Dallas, and Dr. Russell have an article in press in *Qualitative Social Work* on photography as a source of humanizing research findings. Recent graduate David Gwin published an article with Drs. Wisner and Jones in 2010 on the subject of meditation with adolescents.
- The emphasis we place on making research practical is particularly consistent with our mission of preparing public servants who can work with the most disadvantaged groups in our society. For example, in the advanced research course, students conduct evaluation research with public and not-for-profit social service agencies. Students solicit existing data, building bridges between the School and community agencies, and then provide a free service of program evaluation to these agencies in their data analysis and creative research product, which they return to the agency at the end of the semester. In recent years, students have conducted evaluations for a local teen parenting program, an agency providing transportation services for the elderly, and many other diverse agencies and programs. Students have also conducted sampling, survey, and interview research for social services. They learn how to apply for IRB approval and exemption, apply basic knowledge learned in foundation research to a real-world evaluation project through applied statistics, qualitative analyses, and outcome reporting. Currently students are investigating social services for the homeless, veterans’ services, programs for those with mental health and developmental disabilities, HIV/AIDS services, and foster care interventions.
- Dr. Russell, who has conducted the assessment collection for reaccreditation, facilitated focus groups with graduate research classes to collect data and feedback from students about the new 2008 EPAS competencies and practice behaviors. Overall, students agreed that the courses succeeded in applying specific learning and that assignments appropriately taught the targeted practice behaviors.
- Several graduate students have assisted Dr. Russell in the reaccreditation assessment process, which gave them enormous hands-on experience with student outcome measurement. They created numerous data bases, entered data, piloted self-efficacy surveys, ran statistics, and cleaned data.

■ Beginning fall 2009, the School formed a Research Sequence Committee to investigate the research content in both the BSW and MSW curricula across all courses and specifically in the research courses themselves. The committee conducted a survey to explore student perceptions and learning about research, ensuring that we build research knowledge and skills, that the timing of courses enhanced knowledge-building, and that we covered competencies comprehensively. We address the findings of this committee in more detail the Assessment chapter, but it is noteworthy that MSW students agreed that research content across the curriculum:

- ✓ included ethical issues in research
- ✓ identified how research advances human rights and social and economic justice
- ✓ highlighted how research and practice connect
- ✓ stressed how research is linked to effective policy practice and social service delivery
- ✓ pointed out how research is informed by evolving organizational, community, and societal contexts that shape practice.

Also, students agreed that research aids and enhances their practice skills across competency 2.1.10 practice behaviors. For implicit curriculum areas, students stated they enjoyed the research courses, that faculty made content interesting and relevant, and that media and technology used in this coursework enhanced understanding and learning in research.