

CHAPTER 5: RESEARCH



Research Forum 2011



Weaving Research into BSW Curriculum and Practice

Developing Research Leaders

“My term for the education we are giving our students is ‘research-infused’. We cannot talk about teaching without talking about research. And we shouldn’t talk about research without discussing its impact on learning.”
---Dr. Denise Trauth, President of Texas State

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 encourage students to conduct library research, use analytical skills, learn research content, apply research to practice and apply practice to research, critique research findings, and develop and implement research designs. Because faculty members are engaged in research endeavors, they serve as role models to students in becoming skilled at research.



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.

Liberal arts content forms the basis of our BSW knowledge. We build research knowledge on that base, incorporating research into our social work curriculum. The core BSW research course is:

- **Social Work 3340 Social Work Research**, which is open to social work majors, teaches undergraduate students foundation scientific research skills, critical thinking, knowledge of program and practice evaluation, and a

philosophy of generalist social work practice. Students learn how to read, interpret, and critique published research and discuss how published research can inform practice.

Leaders Apply Research to Practice

We teach students both qualitative and quantitative methods, in their research course, and in the experiential and theoretical learning throughout the curriculum and in field. Our aim is to 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. Faculty emphasize teaching students how to evaluate practice, which means they must understand research methods, use critical thinking and critique research, grasp research language and terminology, apply research methods, and appreciate evidence-based practice. Research is integrated into coursework at different levels, especially in practice and field coursework, through interviewing skills, data collection, and analysis for final presentations and written forms of information dissemination.

Dr. Anne Deepak,
with two BSW
students, presented a
paper on
“Challenging
Islamophobia” at the
2011 NASW-Texas
meeting in Dallas.

- ✿ In **SOWK 3340 Research**, undergraduate students learn about positivist and interpretive approaches to social research, including similarities in philosophy, aims, purposes, and methods. Students learn about measurement, standardized data collection and how to read and interpret tables for quantitative data. They also construct questions for qualitative data collection and practice qualitative data analysis techniques in class exercises. Students critique published reports of research studies using both qualitative and quantitative methods. The course encompasses knowledge, values, and skills rooted in a critical thinking framework, emphasizing reciprocal knowledge-building processes of research-based practice and practice-based research, using multiple sources of knowledge and diverse ways of inquiry with various client systems. For example, students apply learning through discussing the relevance of research to practice, how research can further social justice through ethics, and how to use literature to connect research and theory.
- ✿ In **SOWK 3420 Practice I**, when students examine practice theories, they also look at what research says about the effectiveness of each.
- ✿ In **SOWK 3425 Practice II**, students evaluate a macro project in which they apply critical thinking skills to evaluating goals, intervention methods, and applying strengths concepts to community projects. Students prepare a professional poster presentation about this process.
- ✿ **SOWK 4645/4650 Field** students also conduct a macro evaluation and presentation. Through this process, students evaluate research and apply it to experiential learning and skills. Students also learn assessment methods in their bio-psycho-social assessment assignment, applying additional learning through collecting data.
- ✿ Students in **SOWK 1350 Introduction to Social Work** learn the foundation elements of research methods through refining interviewing skills, collecting data, and analyzing their interview of a professional social worker assignment.

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

Leaders Actually Do Research

Students in Dr. Tijerina's SOWK 3340 Research class have researched such topics as using hippotherapy with autistic kids; comparing depression rates in children of military parents with children of civilians; relationship of sex education in middle school vs. high school with teen pregnancy rates; and a qualitative study of factors associated with disproportionality of African Americans in prison.

Students engage in research-informed practice and practice-informed research through expanding their understanding of how practice, policy, and social service delivery are connected, and how research can strengthen those connections. Our research curriculum highlights many opportunities for students to learn how to do research. They often hear faculty report on the research projects that they are conducting and hear from guest speakers about community research projects. These opportunities primarily focus on empirically-based and evidence-based interventions. Students also learn about the values and ethics of professional research by actually conducting research. These activities enhance students' competence in critical thinking and in grasping research-informed practice and practice-informed research

- ✿ In **SOWK 3340 Social Work Research**, students complete a research design and present this to class, a project that enhances critical thinking. Students discuss how research is related to practice, exploring the efficacy of various interventions and the impact of those interventions. Because students design research, they learn about research language and terminology. They become comfortable with research concepts by presenting their designs to others and getting feedback on their projects.
- ✿ Undergraduates in **SOWK 3305 Human Behavior in the Social Environment I** complete a research paper on a macro level social system, including ten references from empirical research.
- ✿ **SOWK 4305 Human Behavior in Social Environment II** students conduct an autobiography and ethnography assignment, applying specific research methods while learning about human behavior.
- ✿ **SOWK 3420 Practice I** students conduct a social history and cases analysis in which they learn to collect data, analyze it, and disseminate the results.
- ✿ Students in **SOWK 3425 Practice II** compare and contrast the major models of conducting community assessments, which include social indicators, rates of treatment, key informant input, community forum feedback, and agency assessments.
- ✿ In **SOWK 4645/4650 Field**, students complete papers which include a critical review of empirical sources. They also conduct an agency report, in which they study and apply methods of data collection and learn to disseminate the results. Their bio-psycho-social assessment assignment also leads students to learn research through collecting, organizing, and evaluating data.
- ✿ **SOWK 4645/4650 Field** students participate in the end-of-semester Community Research Forum by developing and presenting a professional research poster.

Leaders Translate Research into Action

We are committed to teaching students how to move research from a cognitive exercise into action. Thus, we integrate research with practice. This prepares students to appreciate clients' strengths and weaknesses and understanding interventions that are sound. Faculty help students use research to evaluate their own practice, and to employ evidence-based interventions. Our student assignments and activities highlight research as a way to connect research and practice. For example:

In 2009, a BSW student, Dixie, conducted mixed methods research comparing how business majors and social work majors define “success”. Both groups defined success in terms of money, career, family, and happiness. Only 3 social work majors reported “making a difference” as part of their definition of success.

- ✿ Throughout the curriculum, we stress the ethical use of scientific inquiry. In every social work class we discuss the Code of Ethics, which specifically highlights the rights of clients to confidentiality and protection from harm in all aspects of professional practice, including research. In any research project involving clients, students are required to obtain written release forms from the client before proceeding with the study.
- ✿ In **SOWK 3425 Practice II**, students develop a community intervention plan based on the needs of the community and evidenced-based practice interventions. They also evaluate this intervention and present this evaluation using formal language and research skills.
- ✿ In **SOWK 3305 Human Behavior and Social Environment I**, students complete a research paper on a macro social system, including ten references from research references, thus applying both theory and experiential research learning in practice.

Research should be the base on which we make change decisions. We help students use research to initiate change to improve practice, policy, and service delivery by integrating research methods and knowledge into the BSW curriculum through teaching critical thinking, data collection and analysis, and how to apply research to practice. We help students focus on how research can improve practice through such activities as:

- ✿ In **SOWK 3420 Practice I**, students complete three case reviews and apply the skills of beginning practice evaluation.
- ✿ Students taking **SOWK 3425 Practice II** discuss both formative and summative evaluation and the importance of both to macro practice. Students use a force-field analysis to determine the best methods of evaluating a proposed macro-practice change. Students create and develop a community evaluation plan in this course.
- ✿ Students in **4355 Policy Practice** conduct a policy analysis in which they employ research methods of data collection and analysis to critique and apply social justice to existing legislation to improve social policy. This includes reviewing and critiquing existing literature.
- ✿ Students in **SOWK 3340 Research** critique literature and apply learning through designing and presenting research methods to improve practice.

Our Base of Strength in Research

Beginning fall 2009, the School formed a Research Sequence Committee to investigate the research content across the curriculum and in the research courses. The committee conducted a survey to explore student perceptions and learning in research content areas, ensuring research knowledge and skills are well-built and understandable. They wanted to ensure that students progressively gain knowledge through sequencing of the courses, and that competencies were covered comprehensively to teach critical thinking about research-based practice and practice-informed research. The Assessment section of this document covers results in more detail, but clearly, students agreed that research content across the curriculum included ethical issues in research; the ways that research advanced human rights and justice; how research, practice, policy, and service delivery are connected; and how

Students in Dr.
Hawkins' SOWK
3340 Research class
divide into groups to
design research
proposals on such
topics as PTSD,
both in veterans and
in child abuse
victims; substance
abuse, and ADHD.

research is informed by evolving organizational, community, and societal contexts. Students also agreed that research aids and enhances practice skills across Competency 2.1.10. Looking at the implicit curriculum, students stated that they enjoyed the research courses, that faculty made content interesting and relevant, and that using media and technology made the coursework more understandable. Here are ways the School teaches research:

- ✿ A strength of the research curriculum is the fact that faculty and students often work together to conduct research. Faculty work with students on research in many ways beyond the classroom, presenting research at various conferences. For instance, BSW student Loretta Lambert presented with Drs. Tijerina, Norton, and Russell at the 2009 CSWE APM on student perceptions of research.
- ✿ We encourage students to present their own research at such meetings as the Family Preservation Institute or the state NASW meeting. In fact, some students have published papers with faculty.