

# leadership ladders:

STEPS TO A GREAT CAREER IN SOCIAL WORK

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## furthering your social work education: obtaining a doctorate

The highest academic achievement in social work—the PhD (Doctor of Philosophy in Social Work) or DSW (Doctorate in Social Work)—prepares social workers to be key leaders in educational, research, policy and practice settings. Doctoral-prepared social workers are largely responsible for educating the next generation of social workers—and are therefore essential to the sustainability of the profession. Relatively few social workers pursue doctorates—only 308 degrees were awarded during the 2009-2010 academic year (CSWE, 2011). Increasingly, there are more openings for social work faculty than there are graduates of doctoral programs (Anastas & Kuerbis, 2009; GADE, 2011). There is no better time for masters-prepared social workers to consider furthering their education and obtaining a doctorate.



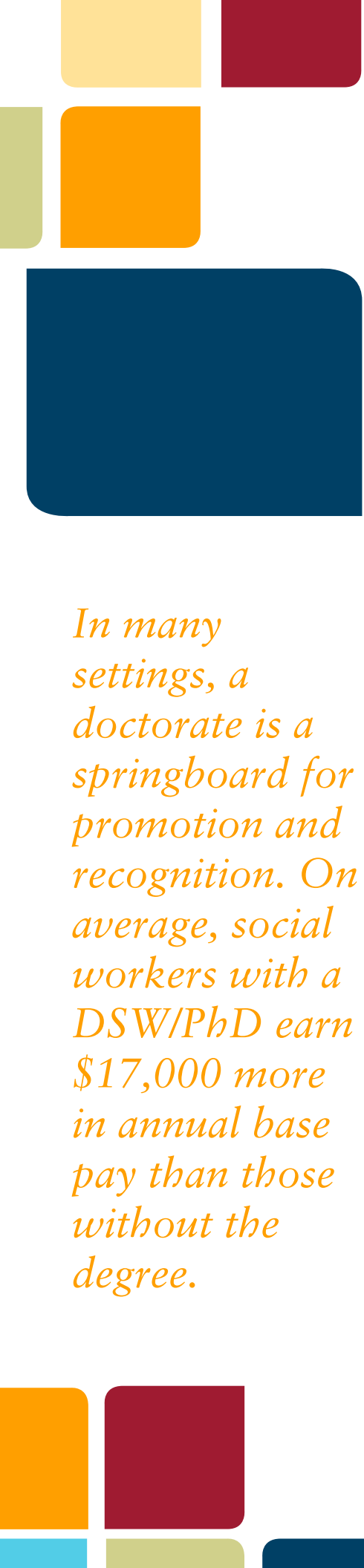
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### » WHAT ARE THE REQUIREMENTS FOR OBTAINING A DSW/PHD?

There are currently 74 social work doctoral programs in the United States (GADE, 2011). Each school has its own individual requirements, but most include the following four components: forty-five semester hours of course work (beyond the MSW); a qualifying examination; a dissertation prospectus; and a dissertation. The dissertation is a product of significant, original research, which makes a substantive contribution to the knowledge base of the profession.

### » WHAT DOES A DOCTORATE IN SOCIAL WORK ALLOW YOU TO DO?

Many graduates of social work doctoral programs work in academia. In 2010, approximately 30% of doctoral graduates obtained tenure-line faculty positions and 10% obtained non-tenure-line faculty positions (CSWE, 2011). Social workers in academia are often “faculty researchers,” involved in teaching and advising undergraduate and graduate students, as well as researching and publishing on subjects that inform and advance the profession.



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With their training as independent researchers, some DSW/PhD graduates join research institutions at local or national levels, often focusing on research related to clinical, social or community issues. A doctoral degree in social work can also equip social workers with the skills necessary for public policy careers, either conducting policy analysis or developing public policy at the state or national level (GADE, 2011). Doctoral prepared social workers also serve as agency administrators and organizational consultants.

» **WHAT ARE THE CAREER BENEFITS OF OBTAINING A DOCTORATE IN SOCIAL WORK?**

In many settings, a doctorate is a springboard for promotion and recognition. On average, social workers with a DSW/PhD earn \$17,000 more in annual base pay than those without the degree (NASW Center for Workforce Studies, 2010). A doctoral degree often provides social workers with advantages in their current work settings. For example, social work clinicians may want to pursue a doctorate in order to access certain referrals (GADE, 2011). In research settings, a doctorate may qualify a social worker to serve as a principal investigator on a federal research grant.

Obtaining a doctorate offers the opportunity to become an expert in a narrow, but substantively important, practice issue. Generally, DSW/PhD social workers find that the expertise gained during their doctoral studies is an asset that they draw upon throughout their careers (Howard, 2009).

» **WHAT ARE THE TIME AND FINANCIAL DEMANDS OF A DOCTORAL PROGRAM?**

It takes most students five to seven years to obtain a doctorate (CSWE, 2011). Unfortunately, doctoral education can be an expensive undertaking: roughly two-thirds of social work doctoral students assume debt, and the average load is \$41,000 (CSWE, 2011). In addition to educational loans, schools of social work

often have their own grants and fellowships for doctoral students, with some schools offering all their doctoral students two to three years of financial support (Jenson, 2008). Many schools will also help students identify external funding.

Students in the latter stage of their doctoral programs often hold teaching or research assistantships, which offset the cost of tuition and fees. Many advanced doctoral students also receive federal research grants; organizational funding for specific types of doctoral training and research (gerontological social work, oncology social work) may be available to students (ACS, 2011; Hartford Foundation, 2011). It is clear that to meet the need for more doctoral-prepared social workers, improving financial support for doctoral education is critical (Schilling et al, 2008).

» **QUESTIONS TO ASK A SOCIAL WORK DOCTORAL PROGRAM – BEFORE YOU ENROLL**

- » Does the institution host doctoral information sessions for prospective students?
- » What are the areas for substantive focus in your doctoral program?
- » What are the faculty's social work/social welfare areas of expertise?
- » What percentage of the students receive financial aid?
- » What financial aid is offered through the institution?
- » What assistance is offered to students in locating and applying for external aid?
- » What is the graduation rate?
- » What is the average number of years it takes students to earn their degrees?
- » How many doctoral students are engaged in research projects with faculty members?
- » How many are teaching BSW/MSW students?
- » How are social work doctoral students involved in service to the university (through advisory committees, student government, etc)?

- › What are the employment settings of recent graduates?
- › Does the doctoral program offer both part-time and full-time educational opportunities?

## RESOURCES

### » GADE - The Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education in Social Work

[www.gadephd.org](http://www.gadephd.org)

The Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education in Social Work (GADE) is an association of social work and social welfare doctoral programs within accredited universities in the U.S. and internationally. GADE offers resources for prospective and current social work doctoral students, including information on doctoral student funding opportunities.

### » Doctoral Education in Social Work (2011)

**Jeane W. Anastas**

This resource book, based on findings from a national survey of social work doctoral students, includes information on students' reasons for seeking doctoral degrees and their doctoral program experiences, including specifics on dissertation research and writing experience and preparation for the PhD job market.

### » A Program Guide for Doctoral Study in Social Work (2003)

**Bruce A. Thyer and Tara Guest Arnold**

A CSWE publication for prospective social work doctoral students, this program guide provides detailed information on 72 doctoral programs in social work in the United States, Canada, and Israel. The volume was produced under the auspices of GADE, which surveyed its member schools on 47 items related to their doctoral program, such as application information, funding for students, tuition and fees, course and practice requirements, and minimum grade-point average and test scores. Also included are a bibliography on doctoral education and an alphabetical index of programs.

### » NASW Foundation Doctoral Fellowships

[www.naswfoundation.org/national.asp](http://www.naswfoundation.org/national.asp)

Through the *Social Workers' National Research and Education Fund*, the NASW Foundation offers annual fellowship awards to social work doctoral students:

- › *The Jane B. Aron Doctoral Fellowship* provides partial support to social work doctoral students who are engaged in dissertation research in health care policy and practice.
- › *The Eileen Blackey Doctoral Fellowship* provides partial support to social work doctoral students who are engaged in dissertation research in welfare policy and practice.

### » Society for Social Work and Research Doctoral Student Center

[www.sswr.org/studentcenter.php](http://www.sswr.org/studentcenter.php)

This helpful portal offers social work doctoral students a variety of electronic resources to enhance their academic experience, including information on dissertation writing, conference presentations, publishing, and student self care, among other topics.

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- Anne Frank*

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