Reflections on Recruiting PhD Students:
Change Happens from Within

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Abstract: The lack of diversity within the academic social work environment has enormous ramifications for the profession as this affects students, the curriculum, academic policies, research inquiry, and knowledge building for the field. The question is—how can this be addressed? One way to do this is for PhD directors/program chairs to recruit and form cohesive cohorts that represent diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds. This reflection includes a retrospective of the behind-the-scenes work and the lessons learned regarding the important process of *recruiting* a diverse group of students. This reflection speaks to the important issue of cohort cohesion: how this helps to support *all* students and their academic success. Finally, this narrative focuses on three social work PhD students from the University of South Florida as they started their precarious journey into academia in a year many would like to forget ever existed.

Keywords: doctoral education, PhD education, diversity, program development, COVID-19

According to the *2020 Annual Statistics on Social Work Education*, 1,463 applicants applied to 62 PhD programs (Council on Social Work Education, 2021). Of those, only 518 applicants (35.4 percent) were accepted into a program, the majority of whom were female, White (non-Hispanic), and over 30 years of age. Furthermore, of the 277 social work research doctorates awarded in 2019–2020, the majority of graduates were female, White (non-Hispanic), and over 30 years of age. It is no surprise then that in Fall 2020, the majority of full-time faculty members in social work programs were female and White (non-Hispanic).

This lack of diversity among social work faculty is a problem for many reasons (Chadiha et al., 2014). These include but are not limited to privileging of educational content from a White majority lens, lack of understanding and representation of students from different cultures and racial backgrounds, and academic systems of rewards that favor particular types of research as well as specific areas of inquiry (Wingfield & Adams, 2019). In sum, the lack of diversity within the academic social work environment has enormous ramifications for the profession as this affects students, the curriculum, academic policies, and research inquiry and knowledge building for the field. The question is—how can this be addressed? One way to do this is for PhD directors/program chairs to recruit and form cohesive cohorts that represent diverse ethnic and racial backgrounds, while also advocating for emerging areas of scholarship, as well as those in traditional fields of practice. (This work focuses on the recruitment of students for a PhD degree, however recruitment for students for the DSW degree is also of interest to many social work students and professionals seeking a higher educational degree.)

It is interesting to note, for as much as there is written about PhD programs, there is little attention to the undertakings of *how to recruit* a qualified entering cohort (e.g., Anastas & Kuerbis, 2009, Aubrey et al., 2016; Danso & Aalgaard, 2019). There may be various reasons for this. These include (a) competition for applicants keep program directors from discussing recruitment strategies, (b) recruiting applicants is done from another office or not part of the

PhD program director's role, (c) senior or esteemed scholars informally recruit applicants to the school and/or specifically to their research project, or (d) the reputation of the school attracts applicants. Of course, there may be other reasons as well. For instance, entangled with the issue of recruitment are the university admissions requirements, as well as those of the individual PhD program prerequisites. The main point is that the *recruitment process* of students to pursue a PhD has received little attention in the larger discussion of the lack of diversity among faculty in social work programs (Creecy et al., 1979; Francis et al., 2021).

Because there is scant literature about how PhD chairs/directors engage in the recruitment process (Chin et al., 2018), or the experiences of PhD applicants, this reflection includes a retrospective of the behind the scenes work and the lessons learned regarding the important process of recruiting a diverse group of students. In addition, this reflection speaks to the issue of cohort cohesion—how this important component helps to support *all* students and their academic success (Brady et al., 2015). Finally, this narrative focuses on the (not so) extraordinary story of three social work PhD students from the University of South Florida (USF) as they started their precarious journey into academia in a year many would like to forget ever existed. This diverse group of social work PhD students started their application process just prior to the January 2020 invasion of the COVID-19 virus in the US. Put together, this reflection speaks to the lessons learned about the recruitment process that precedes the start of the academic year, and the stories of a diverse and impressive PhD cohort.

Assuming the PhD Program Chair Role

Let's start at the beginning. Sometime in 2018, I (Dr. Fogel) received the "ask" to reinstate our PhD program. While this was an exciting opportunity, it certainly was terrifying as well. The beginnings of a PhD program certainly can provide many challenges. The increase to my workload, the need for curriculum development, and learning about university processes and procedures was at times overwhelming. In addition, the timing for the first cohort was Fall 2019, which meant a lot of the behind the scenes work that had to be done was occurring at the same time as recruitment for our first students had to begin.

What did I know about how to do this? I reached out to a PhD program director at another university for assistance with understanding how to begin recruitment and what I should be aware of. The PhD program director was very helpful, sharing marketing material and event planning information. However, recruiting applicants for a new program such as ours was going to be more challenging. There was limited funding for marketing and no time for planning a recruiting event. Instead, social media, listserv blasts, and local word of mouth were the primary tools used to promote the program.

In our school, the PhD committee is responsible for selecting candidates for consideration of an offer. Our committee uses a holistic approach to evaluate an application package. According to Francis et al. (2021), this method views each applicant independently of others, considering their background, non-academic and other experiences, and previous educational accomplishments as well as other required material. For social work doctoral programs, this is not hard to do.

Applicants reveal their individuality through their personal statement, writing sample, professional experience, interview procedures, and other informal interactions, including emails.

As the PhD chair, my role includes engaging with all applicants to answer questions, describe the program and requirements (What is a dissertation?), schedule interviews, and represent the faculty as well as the program. While these activities are geared to build a pool of applicants, I recognized early on that I am also building a relationship with each applicant. Through emails, conversations, and questions asked, it is easy to get to know quite a bit about the applicants: their reasons for pursuing the PhD, why now, past experiences, future goals, ability to deal with frustrations and accept critical feedback. This process of getting to know the applicant takes considerable time and is worth the additional effort. As I later reflected on this process, the ability to *build rapport* with each applicant became an important part of the recruitment process. This was an important first lesson.

While learning about an applicant's research interests and past professional experience helps to identify potential faculty mentors, assessing an applicant's fit with other applicants is also important. (Remember, not all students will accept offers of admission.) This informal assessment is also an important piece in the recruitment process that is often left unsaid. This is the second lesson learned. Knowing a bit about the personalities, past experiences, and research interests of the applicants are very helpful pieces of information to use to build and support cohort cohesion even before the students actually meet. It is very important that the PhD program chair is transparent and consistent with each applicant regarding program information, expectations, challenges, and opportunities. In speaking with potential applicants, this can be done by sharing—very generally—the interests of other applicants that may be similar to those of the applicant that you are speaking with. However, this must carefully be done without sharing personal information that can easily identify who may be applying to the program.

Starting out, our small Fall 2019 cohort was ready, capable, and diverse. Most applicants found us through our local marketing efforts, but other social media avenues led students to us as well. We all began this semester hopeful for an exciting experience that will begin the career trajectories of these new scholars as well as to help inform and improve our program and processes. However, the first year led to a few students leaving the program as they determined that this career path was not in line with their goals. As I learned, attrition is not uncommon in PhD programs, yet this was very disappointing. Their experience made me reflect on the recruitment process and identify areas to improve as well as lessons learned from the initial cohort recruitment. Two of these lessons are noted above.

What may not be apparent is that as the first semester was beginning for the first cohort, recruiting for the next cohort was also occurring! However, prior to starting this effort, the PhD committee took time to evaluate if our admissions procedures worked as intended, which was to admit a diverse cohort of students who will be successful in the program. The PhD committee also spent time reflecting on our first year of recruitment and the processes we used. We learned several things. For instance, it was important to ask specific questions during the applicant's interview about scholarly interests, professional plans, readiness for the workload, and scholarly product expectations. Many applicants were in desire of an advanced degree, especially to

advance their desirability to teach students. The resources from the Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education proved to be very valuable to share with applicants, as this organization provides overviews of the doctoral programs, has resources that clarify what the difference is between the PhD and DSW, and offers applicants opportunities to see what doctoral students are doing.

Other important reflections for the recruitment effort included the importance of frequent conversations with me, the PhD program chair, by phone or email. The purpose of these conversations was to build relationships with applicants, but also set the tone and expectations for academic and professional success in the program. In addition, these conversations explored their research and personal interests in the program, expectations of other graduate students, availability of local social support networks, and interest in the social work profession, not just the degree. There were also a few other lessons learned related to how to run the admissions process in the school in coordination with the college and university, sources for student funding, and reviewing common applicant misunderstandings about how the process worked. Most importantly, we learned that students enter this advanced degree program with a great deal of variation in their readiness for the type of pedagogical models in PhD education. In our case, we endorse an apprenticeship model, also described as the "signature pedagogy" of PhD programs (Lyons & Doueck, 2010, p. 7).

As applications for the Fall 2020 cohort were received, we renewed our commitment to recruit a diverse cohort who would be successful in the PhD program. At this time, plans for a typical program start were in place and no one had heard of COVID-19. Then, we did. Even though we were virtual for the Spring 2020 semester, we continued with our recruitment efforts, improved by the lessons learned from the previous year, expecting a typical Fall 2020 experience for students. Despite COVID-19, our second cohort was an excited group of new, diverse students waiting for the Fall 2020 semester to begin. Our improved recruitment efforts paid off!

Here are the remarkable stories of the how this PhD cohort—the COVID-19 Fall 2020 cohort—managed the start of their scholarly journey—in their own words. Grit, resilience, diversity, and unknown (to them) commonality all combined to bring into view the future of our profession.

In the Beginning

In the Fall of 2020, Amy Nourie, Stephanie Rosado, and Shelton K. Gilyard, Jr. began their academic expedition at USF, each leaving behind a career and stable income to pursue their dreams of working in higher education. Stephanie relocated (again) from Philadelphia, PA, to sunny Tampa, FL, leaving behind her role as a supervisor in child welfare. Amy left her position as a supervisor at the Guardian ad Litem Program after working for 11 years in the Florida child welfare system. Shelton gave up his 20-year social work career in early childhood development and contract management to pursue that elusive PhD. For some reason, applying to graduate school at this time seemed the right thing to do. This feeling was only reinforced as the incoming cohort members quickly bonded. Although these three students came from starkly different walks of life, they "clicked." Maybe it worked because the two former athletes (Shelton and Stephanie) had enough of a sense of humor and thick skin to deal with the (very)

non-athletic New Englander, Amy. Or maybe they bonded because Shelton's laid-back personality balanced out Amy and Stephanie's detail-oriented personalities.

Maybe they bonded because they were instantly referred to as the "COVID Cohort" and this automatically linked them together for having the courage to start a PhD program in the middle of a historic pandemic. Or maybe, just maybe, they felt safe—bonding because they knew that they could be themselves, their whole selves. No one really knows why they initially clicked (well, maybe the PhD program chair does), but the three students soon formed a tight bond of complete acceptance. Diversity was not an issue for this cohort. In fact, it created a sense of belonging. Here are their stories of why they applied and what they found.

Shelton

Growing up in a small northeast Florida town, a fifth-generation migrant farm worker, I realized at an early age that I wanted more for my life and that my dreams were bigger than my circumstances. I was no stranger to hard work and, by age 10, I knew what it was like to stack 50-pound bags of potatoes for eight hours and carry a basket of cucumbers across a 50-yard field for one dollar. With a sense of pride, a fierce work ethic, and a value for education, I earned my BSW and MSW from the USF School of Social Work program and dedicated my career to promoting the health and safety of children with disabilities. My experience serving children and families impacted by developmental disabilities, including those with autism spectrum disorders, extends more than 20 years, connecting research to practice, and funding to outcomes. I am a former Olympic level athlete, winning ten Olympic Weightlifting National Championships, five collegiate championships, and breaking multiple American records in my athletic career. I realized a lifelong dream of leaving the state of Florida to pursue Olympic aspirations, as I was invited to the Olympic Training Center in Colorado Springs to prepare for the 2004 US Olympic Weightlifting Team Trials.

Although a doctoral degree was always one of my goals, participating in the Multicultural Mental Health Training Program was the catalyst for pursuing a PhD. This fellowship program, funded through the Florida Legislature, aimed at increasing the number of ethnic minority mental health professionals in the state. This provided early exposure to my understanding of the importance of more minorities, particularly Black males like me, to engage in empirical behavioral research. After reaching out to another career-long mentor, I applied to the USF PhD program. After my acceptance, I met two of the most dissimilar individuals who also were deciding to pursue doctoral degrees in the midst of a global pandemic. I knew right then this decision was the correct one. The "COVID Cohort" is the nickname that we became known as, and we planned to realize this journey together.

Amy

I always identified as a social worker but, without a BSW or MSW, could I actually say that I was, in fact, a social worker? After working full-time and attending a rigorous, online master's degree program in Family, Youth, and Community Sciences, and still remaining at the same job in child welfare, with the same issues, and the same pay, I realized I needed more. Maybe I was

no longer needed on the front lines of child welfare and, instead, would be more useful in research and academia. Although obtaining a PhD was always a goal in the back of my mind, I didn't think it was ever really a possibility. Yet, I applied to PhD programs in social work, and was accepted at USF.

After making the difficult decision to leave my stable job, with a steady, though relatively small, income, I began my PhD journey in the Fall of 2020 … in the middle of a pandemic. The most amazing thing happened within just a few months of starting school. Yes, I took some great classes and met some helpful and remarkable professors. But the best part of this entire process was the immediate bond I felt with my cohort. There are only three of us and we are very, very different, from unique points in our lives with incredibly distinct research interests. Somehow, though, we clicked. I am a very guarded person and don't let people in my bubble without a long period of testing. Despite this, the other members of my cohort seem to accept me and I, in return, accept them and trust them unconditionally. For some reason, they encourage my wild fantasies about saving the world and using critical feminist and queer theories to explain the downfall of the child welfare system and how to fix it. It's almost as if this is actually where I belong.

Stephanie

I am an outgoing Latina with a big voice and an even bigger heart. I am prideful of my upbringing and take every chance to share that my hometown and humble beginnings in the poverty-stricken urban city of Pontiac, MI, commenced the building of my resilient nature. Pontiac and my environment made me value education as I knew it was my ticket out of the "hood." As an adolescent, I found basketball and knew that coupled together, basketball and education, would surely take me far as long as I put in enough hard work. Throughout my educational and sport journey, I knew that I wanted to contribute to the greater good and make an impact for someone in need.

I played division I college basketball and also played professionally overseas. I led the Puerto Rican Women's Olympic team to their first gold medal in the 2010 Centro Basket Caribbean Games. However, my athletic career was plagued with injury and a host of other vulnerabilities. My athletic career ultimately ended because of double knee reconstructive surgery. After some career transitions and trial and error, I discovered my niche and career aspiration in social work with an emphasis on sport social work.

My interest in sport social work began as an MSW candidate at the University of Southern California. There, I became an executive committee member of the Alliance of Social Workers in Sports and published an op-ed titled "Student Athletes Deserve Mental Health Care Access" in the Fort Wayne Journal Gazette (Rosado, 2018). I understand firsthand that athletes are more than the physical characteristics associated with peak performance. Furthermore, especially for minority athletes, I know that sport is oftentimes a feasible route to higher education and attainment of a decent career that would otherwise be unavailable to them. I am amazed that like me, so many other athletes, although vulnerable, have been able to overcome their own circumstances and contribute to the greater good. Athletes throughout history have bypassed risk

factors, and changed the trajectory of their own lives as well as their communities, by utilizing sport as a catapult to change their circumstances.

I decided to pursue my PhD at USF with intentions to contribute relevant evidence to sport social work literature as a way to promote sports as an intervention for social change and well-being. I also want to inform best practices for the mental health of athletes. I was led to USF through the advice of a long-term mentor. I was made aware that USF embraces diversity, welcomes novel ideas, and would be a great fit to continue my professional development. My application, interview, and admission process for the PhD were quite unique in that they occurred right before the coronavirus pandemic. I relocated from Philadelphia, PA, to Tampa, FL, in the midst of the pandemic, led by faith and optimism. Something just felt right about it. My gut-feeling did not let me down as I quickly bonded with faculty and cohort members.

In Less Than 365 Days

There has been a lot of attention focused on the impact of COVID-19 on the typical college-age student (Lederer et al., 2021; Scheffert et al., 2021). However, less attention is paid to the adult learners who were entering universities during COVID-19. Like other students, these new PhD students had to begin their PhD program using virtual technology for everything: courses, meeting their peers, engaging in university activities, and functioning as independent learners more quickly than expected. These students did not have the typical informal opportunities to meet other faculty and establish formal and informal relationships. The usual pedagogical model for engaging PhD students in professional socialization was thrown away as everyone—faculty, students, and administrators—were working day by day to ensure safe, supportive, and personalized attention was given to all.

After a year in the program, the meaningful learning experience of the COVID-19 Cohort is revealed by the clarity of what they can now articulate as the focus of their work. A significant contributor to their success *was* their diversity and appreciation of each other's strengths, areas of differences, and struggles, while recognizing their common goal to obtain their PhD. Their group dynamics of support, respect for the individual, and honest constructive feedback demonstrate that what can bind groups together is less about their differences, but more about what they want to contribute to others.

Building this cohort cohesion is certainly an unspoken issue in this process (Brady et al., 2015). The chair of the PhD program can play a huge role in creating this sense of community. However, not enough attention has been paid to how the PhD group dynamics contribute to the successful outcomes of PhD students. This is unfortunate as it was and it is this important element—the cohort cohesion of the COVID-19 class—that has pulled and pushed these three diverse scholars towards clarity of their research and self-assuredness of their place in the academy (with a little help from their PhD program chair). Here is where they are now.

Shelton

My research is in the area of behavioral health with an emphasis on health disparities and access to early screening, navigation, and resource linkage among children and families impacted by autism spectrum disorders (ASD). At this time, male children, and more specifically Black male children, are most likely to be diagnosed with this condition after a school referral (Sheldrick et al., 2022). This means that early services and supports to help children develop social skills and intervene in family issues are thwarted by a delay in the diagnosis (Elder et al., 2017). Furthermore, there is no indication that the prevalence of ASD is on the decline nor the complex behavioral health needs of diverse communities particularly in the projected post COVID-19 era (Maenner et al., 2021). The intersection of screening for autism spectrum disorders and the use of e-health technology such as a chatbot to aid in the early access of behavioral health services among minority families is an area that needs to be investigated. The use of chatbot technology among mothers of children with ASD has enormous social and health implications for early detection among children and parental education related to this condition. My research will add to the body of knowledge on the use of technology for raising autism awareness, and potentially influence policy around delivery of services to children and families impacted by autism spectrum disorders across service systems.

I recognize that we are in a transformative period in our nation's history. The imperfect history of our country, the awakened cultural consciousness, and the recognized need for change: Our cohort exemplifies the kind of purposeful efforts necessary to unpack system barriers to a diverse academia. The need for research and expanded knowledge around the complex social challenges within communities of color is long overdue to foster a stronger society. These complex research questions need to be explored and answered from an inclusive perspective of a social scientist more representative of the diverse society in which we live.

Amy

As a teenager, my goals were large, grandiose, and probably unobtainable. Specifically, I wanted to save the world and make it a better place for everyone. Now, as a PhD student doing research, with years of child welfare experience under my belt, I'd have to say my goals are pretty similar to the goals of my younger self. Though I still want to save the world, as many social workers do, I think my understanding of what saving the world looks like has changed. Maybe I cannot completely end child poverty or eliminate sexism or racism in America on my own, but I can have a lasting impact on these issues through my research and publications. I can also impart my wisdom and knowledge of social justice issues onto new social workers as a teacher at the college level. I want my impact in the social work academic world to be the same as my non-academic life. Specifically, I want to be a good mother, wife, daughter, and friend who advocates for radical changes in unjust, unequitable, and unfair policies and systems across the globe.

So, yes, I still want to save the world, but I have a greater understanding of what needs to be fixed and how to begin the process. I want the world to be a more just and equitable place for all, and I want to empower future social workers to also strive for these big goals of justice and

equity. As a cisgender white woman (among several other intersectional identities), I understand that I have an incredible amount of unearned privilege. Rather than focus on the guilt I feel for having this privilege, I, instead, choose to focus on action. The question is not, what *can* I do, but what *am* I doing and what will I continue to do. I will continue to be actively anti-racist and advocate for racial equity in my research and academic writing. I will continue to promote a more diverse social work environment, especially in management, leadership, and academia. I will continue to use a feminist, queer, and intersectional lens in all my work and writing, unapologetically. I will especially continue to uplift my fellow LGBTQ+ community members because life is so much more fun and beautiful with rainbows and cats.

Stephanie

The research interests that I came into the program with are now more specific and specialized. They still consist of helping people, sport social work, addressing vulnerabilities, and making a difference within communities of color. However, these research interests are now research areas: They are now doable, researchable, and clear. This was done through constant mentoring from faculty, research advisors, and peer mentors as well as the active role and genuine interest in my success that was taken by the program director. Now going into my second year, when someone asks that question that I once dreaded and took 10 minutes to answer, "What's your research interest or area?" I can confidently say, "I am interested in addressing osteoarthritis, a health disparity that largely impacts communities of color. More specifically, I'm interested in the biopsychosocial effects of the disease and its impact on young adults, such as athletes and others young groups." BOOM! Two sentences! Honestly, the first time I was able to just spit those two sentences out fluidly and without skipping a beat, I felt so proud. I attribute this to the mentoring that I received in my program which stretched me, challenged me, and continues to develop my critical thinking capabilities.

I am still figuring things out as far as what my future will look like. As a perfectionist and goal-oriented person, this only exacerbates my anxiety. But somewhere, deep inside, where I can't even see right now, blinded by my doctoral studies, I know that my future entails an eclectic career full of teaching, being a life-long student, and being an advocate for the unique subspecialty of sport social work. I am sure that I will have my hands in multiple pots and wear multiple hats, so to speak, but I would not have it any other way. One thing that everyone knows about me, and that has been apparent from all the reflections earlier, is that I am always willing to get my hands dirty, help out when I can, try new things, and be the first to dive into learning a new skill. I guess I see my future as an outgoing explorer of the academic realm and the world at large, but also as a person who wants to use my eagerness to learn, bravery, and eclectic skillset to make a better path for those coming behind me.

Recruiting Forward

There was a meaningful, transformational process that occurred in this cohort. Faculty and course content moved these students into new ways of critical thinking. However, this group held each other together. Their experience was not without the typical pressures one may expect when entering a PhD program—and that does not even include dealing with COVID-19.

Instead, upon reflection, it was their differences—and their recognition of these differences—that helped them be supportive of each other and push on through the "pain" of a PhD program.

As PhD program chair, I (Dr. Fogel) am watching this process and continuously reflecting on what is making this cohort work and what did I learn from this class because—as they were in their first semester—I am in the process of recruiting for the next cohort. While I am doing this, the PhD committee is also reflecting on what research interests, skill sets, and other factors will influence the selection of applicants offered admission to the program. My biggest lesson should not surprise anyone. I remain convinced that it is the diversity within the cohort that dismantles the competition, fears, and doubts often found in groups of students pursuing intense, advanced work. Experiencing the dynamism of this cohort was instructive for recruiting and selecting applicants for our next PhD cohort: Fall 2021. A small, diverse group of students accepted the offer to join our PhD program. They too are from under-represented faculty groups in the social work academy. And already, this group has formed a bond with each other, as well as with the previous cohorts.

Conclusion

Soon, these students will be seeking academic positions. There is no doubt that these future scholars will continue to diversify our field and be influential to our scholarly thoughts. Recruiting for PhD programs is an understudied area in the larger conversation of diversity in the social work academy. More specifically, examining the role of the PhD program chair in the process of recruiting diverse cohorts is vital and needs further study. In the meantime, there is a need for action among PhD programs. PhD programs can and should evaluate their educational content and administrative practices and demonstrate efforts to implement the recommendations noted in the Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education in Social Work's (2020) *Statement on Anti-Racism* as we move further into the 21st century. And if anything is clear, it is the diversity of the cohort—characteristics, as well as critical area of interests—that builds opportunities to further the conversations about creating inclusive educational environments and scholarly content that is reflective of our larger society. This is how the academy will change.

End Note

All paths, plans, opinions, and academic development statuses detailed for this cohort are as they were at the time of writing in 2021.

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