

Social Work Education Leadership: Insights From Faculty and Staff

Christina Chiarelli-Helminiak

Nada Elias-Lambert

Shannon R. Lane

Melina Papanikolaou

Abstract: *Social work education-specific leadership models are necessary to maximize the effectiveness of the profession's role in addressing societal issues that impact individuals, families, and communities and promote feminist leadership within the profession and academy. A cross-sectional electronic survey design gathered information from faculty and staff members at accredited social work programs within the United States. Study participants included 88 full- and part-time faculty and staff. 50 of the 88 participants (57%) answered the open-ended question from which data for this study were analyzed and triangulated with responses to other questions. The data analysis process resulted in identification of three main themes: conceptualization of leadership, support for leadership, and barriers to leadership. Participants expressed the need for more thoughtful succession planning, leadership specific training, and support in removing barriers to leadership. Many of the problems raised could be addressed through systemic change in higher education, including the proposed model of social work education leadership praxis.*

Keywords: *Higher education, leadership, social work, feminist leadership*

The demand for social workers across the globe continues to grow. The consequences of COVID-19, concerns about unmet mental health needs, and racial injustice highlight and exacerbate societal inequalities and the necessity of socially just services and advocacy. Leadership in social work education will drive how our profession emerges in a post-pandemic world. Yet, as a profession we lack a social work-specific or social work education-specific leadership model (Peters, 2018; Peters & Hopkins, 2019; Rofuth & Piepenbring, 2020). This manuscript will present the qualitative findings of a study focused on leadership in U.S. social work education as well as a model for social work education leadership praxis.

Leadership Within Social Work

Social work education-specific leadership models are necessary to maximize the effectiveness of the profession's role in addressing societal issues that impact individuals, families, and communities. With the U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics (2022) estimating 715,600 social work positions currently existing, leaders of the 860 programs accredited by the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE; 2023) have a vast opportunity to influence how the values of the social justice-oriented profession are put into practice. The CSWE 2022 *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* (EPAS) highlight that social

Christina Chiarelli-Helminiak, PhD, MSW, Professor, Graduate Social Work Department, West Chester University, West Chester, PA. Nada Elias-Lambert, PhD, LCSW, Associate Professor, Department of Social Work, Texas Christian University, Fort Worth, TX. Shannon R. Lane, PhD, LMSW, Associate Professor, Wurzweiler School of Social Work, Yeshiva University, New York, NY. Melina Papanikolaou, MSW, Graduate Assistant, Graduate Social Work Department, West Chester University, West Chester, PA.

Copyright © 2024 Authors, Vol. 24 No. 2 (Summer 2024), 481-502, DOI: 10.18060/27503



This work is licensed under a [Creative Commons Attribution 4.0 International License](https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by/4.0/).

work faculty and administrators “based on their education, knowledge, and skills, are best suited to make decisions regarding the delivery of social work education” (p. 29). Leadership of accredited programs is required through identified program directors at the baccalaureate and master’s levels. According to CSWE (2022), program directors’ leadership ability is described “through teaching, scholarship, curriculum development, administrative experience, and/or other academic and professional activities in social work” (p. 31). While the accreditation standards are clear that program directors provide educational and administrative leadership to the program (CSWE, 2022), there is no common expectation on how to preside over an accredited program, making it difficult to isolate the specific skills necessary to become an effective social work education leader. A discrepancy also exists in how much time CSWE requires for these leaders to execute their responsibilities, with baccalaureate program directors requiring, at minimum, 25% release time and master’s program directors requiring, at minimum, 50% assigned time. Additionally, program directors are just one type of social work education leaders. Schools or centers of social work are frequently led by deans, associate deans, directors, or chairs. These roles are not completely addressed within the accreditation standards. There are also informal leaders within programs at the local level, and social work educators who serve in administration at the university level. Social workers employed within the higher education host setting may also enter the academy with social service organizational leadership experience.

Social work leaders are often called on to make changes other leaders may not be bold enough to address (Holosko, 2009). Current societal issues that require an anti-racist or anti-oppressive approach to advance human rights in the U.S. context are within the wheelhouse of social work practice expertise. Powell and Kelly (2017) highlight the need for social work academics to be leaders in fighting white supremacy within our communities and institutions, particularly calling on white academics to consider their roles as allies, accomplices, and agitators in this work. CSWE reiterated the importance of anti-racist work in the 2022 EPAS.

Over the past 20 years, research on social work leadership development has increased due to the national shortage of leaders who utilize social work values to address social injustices (Peters, 2017). Social work leaders with decision-making power are likely to be more empathetic and prioritize the health and well-being of human beings (Sullivan, 2016). Choy-Brown and colleagues (2020) found that in comparison to social service leaders with non-social work backgrounds, social work leaders were more likely to use transformative leadership, that social work leaders and their staff members were more likely to say their environments were reflective of recovery-oriented values, and that social work leaders fostered environments with less stress and better open communication between staff and management than non-social work leaders.

In a qualitative study of social work practitioners in Canada, Vito (2020) found seven key areas that leaders found important. These included the ability to influence and motivate others towards common goals; building and investing in trusting relationships; and creating shared and achievable visions in collaborations with colleagues. Participants in this study emphasized the need to serve as role models and exemplify the values they wanted to reinforce in others. Participants emphasized that successful motivating, coaching, and

mentoring of staff should be done in strengths-based and supportive manners. They were in agreement on the importance of fostering teamwork and collaboration. One area they saw as important, but many struggled with, was finding meaningful, personal, and positive ways to recognize staff.

Social work-specific leadership professional development can foster inclusive leaders who value the expertise of front-line workers and clients (Sullivan, 2016). There is a critical need for leaders who embrace social work values crucial in creating equitable and inclusive working environments (Peters, 2017). A social work education-specific leadership model has the potential to increase confidence, authority, and clarity within social work education, research, and practice.

Social Work Leadership Models

Numerous organizational leadership models exist but are rarely from a social work or feminist-based approach. Leadership models are frequently adopted from outside the social work sphere and focus on transactional or transformational leadership (Iachini et al., 2015). Transactional leadership focuses on transactions or exchanges between the leader and worker with external motivation offered in the form of performance-based rewards. Alternatively, transformational leadership is characterized by leaders using their behaviors and philosophies to motivate employees and develop a high functioning work environment. Components of this style include idealized influence, inspirational motivation, intellectual stimulation, and individualized consideration of each employee to benefit the organization (Iachini et al., 2015; Rofuth & Piepenbring, 2020). Transformational leadership is aligned with the social work values of dignity and worth of the person and the importance of human relationships (National Association of Social Workers [NASW], 2021); however, Spillane (2005) argues that this style lacks the complexity and in-depth approach of participatory or distributive leadership often adopted in feminist-led organizations. The distributive leadership approach is centered around the value of supportive interactions between people and their situations (Iachini et al., 2015). Utilizing the distributive leadership model, leaders allocate tasks and depend on colleagues to meet the goals of a project. This supportive group mindset is a practice familiar to social workers as it strongly aligns with the values of the profession (Iachini et al., 2015). Participatory leadership engages the team in decision-making, rather than applying a top-down approach. Distributive and participatory leadership align with the social work values of the importance of human relationships and competence as they empower employees to grow and learn professionally (Lawler, 2007; NASW, 2021).

The Social Change Model (SCM) of Leadership, which incorporates aspects of servant and collective leadership, centers on empowerment and collaboration. Similar to distributive leadership, SCM encourages leadership development through the consideration of multiple perspectives when evaluating the most effective approach toward social change and social justice. The SCM is grounded in individual, group, and community values that parallel social work values, including consciousness of self, congruence, commitment, common purpose, controversy with civility, and citizenship (Iachini et al., 2015; Rofuth & Piepenbring, 2020).

Social Work Education-Specific Leadership Model

When promoted to formal leadership roles, social work faculty are often underprepared. Academic training primarily focuses on research production and only 17% of social work PhD programs indicate a focus on leadership (Lee et al., 2023). Training for academic administrative positions often aligns with managerialism, which includes being taught to manage higher education institutions as if corporations. Such training can be counterproductive because it focuses on end goals rather than student-centered approaches and valuing every employee's potential impact on the students and the institution. Sullivan (2016) proposed social work-specific leadership training on how to combat social injustices, embrace the worth of each person, and offer services that work to reduce inequities among marginalized populations. Social work education leadership informed by this approach would encourage issues related to gender, discrimination, and power inequities to be addressed by those in leadership roles (Peters, 2017). Lazzari and colleagues (2009) state "leadership guided by feminist principles can serve as a facilitator of social change" (p. 357).

Identity, Intersectionality, and Academic Experiences

Identity characteristics such as race, gender, sexual orientation, and ability status play a key role in the experiences of those in academia. Women in general are more likely to be assigned or agree to take on housekeeping or caregiving tasks in teaching and academic service, tasks which require a significant amount of time and emotional labor but are less visible and unlikely to lead to proportionate career advancement. Women of color are expected to spend time on these caregiving tasks, as well as additional responsibilities related to anti-racism, diversity, equity, and inclusion (A DEI) initiatives, and intensive mentoring and support of Black, Indigenous, People of Color (BIPOC) students and colleagues, while also doing this within institutions that are often hostile places replicating white supremacy (Docka-Filipek & Stone, 2021). In a systematic review, Friedensen and colleagues (2021) found that research about the experience of faculty members with disabilities was sorely lacking and that visible disabilities were overrepresented compared to research on invisible disabilities. Faculty members with disabilities report discrimination, harassment, and unfair treatment related to their disability at higher rates (Shigaki et al., 2012). Faculty members with chronic illness face stigma and confusion about how they fit into the academy and what policies exist to support them (Goodwin & Morgan, 2012).

Intersectionality Among Social Work Faculty and Leaders

While the diversity of social work degree holders has increased in recent years, this has not been reflected in the diversity of those in current social work education leadership positions. According to Bryan and colleagues (2019), African American and Latinx social work faculty are disproportionately underrepresented compared to the number of African American and Latinx students. They also report experiencing fundamentally different treatment than their white colleagues. Faculty members of color report assumptions that

they are the expert on their culture and are frequently assigned to lead curriculum and events related to their racial or ethnic identity (Bryan et al., 2019; Chiarelli-Helminiak et al., 2021). Social work faculty members who identify as queer, a person of color, or from working-class backgrounds spend more time on invisible service to their departments and institutions, which can negatively affect their opportunities, including work that makes them competitive for tenure and promotion (Chiarelli-Helminiak et al., 2021; Social Sciences Feminist Network Research Interest Group, 2017). The feeling of isolation is common among leaders of diverse racial identity because of the limited faculty who also identify as a person of color (Bryan et al., 2019). Furthermore, pay inequity persists in social work education given that women in administrative positions earn less than men in non-administrative faculty positions (Tower et al., 2019).

A qualitative study involving social work faculty members who identified as lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ), with diverse gender, religious, and racial identities, found that risks to personal and professional safety were important to the experience of being “out” in the academy (Prock et al., 2019). Similar to the experiences of faculty of color, LGBTQ faculty were asked to represent all other members of their community, participate in time-consuming activities, or assumed to be experts on all issues in the queer and trans communities. Participants expressed concern about lack of support within their schools or universities, including blocking access to funding and concerns about whether research on sexual minorities was “important,” and at times felt they had less credibility among colleagues. Participants in leadership discussed their responsibilities as leaders to support diversity and be role models.

Research Purpose

Social work has made strides to advance leadership-specific social work education but there is still work to be done to ensure that future social work education leaders are equipped to implement social work values within the higher education host setting. The purpose of the current research was to examine the factors, including identity and professional factors, that contributed to decisions among social work faculty and staff to pursue leadership opportunities. Social work education leadership as described below includes both formal and informal leadership, as defined by participants.

Materials and Methods

A cross-sectional electronic survey design gathered information from individuals identified as faculty and staff members at CSWE-accredited social work programs in the United States. As neither a public list nor database of all the social work faculty and staff existed, recruitment consisted of two methods. First, fliers were posted and distributed at CSWE’s Annual Program Meeting in Denver, CO in Fall 2019. Second, a recruitment email was sent to the Baccalaureate Program Directors (BPD) and National Association of Deans and Directors (NADD) listservs. All recruitment material included an informed consent and the contact information for the Institutional Research Board (IRB) at Texas Christian University which approved the study (#1920-38-AM2). Data collection began in November 2019. Unfortunately, the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic precluded further

in-person recruitment necessary to diversify the sample and data collection was therefore concluded in March 2020. According to CSWE's (2020) statistics on social work education during the academic year of data collection, there were more than 5,616 full-time social work educators in the United States as reported by 538 participating social work programs. Data on social work program staff are currently unavailable.

Data were collected via Qualtrics Survey Software, with IP addresses not included to maintain anonymity. The online survey included questions related to demographics, leadership and leadership preparation, attitudes toward institutions, and job satisfaction. Data analysis included univariate and bi-variate analysis of variables related to leadership as well as qualitative analysis of several open-ended questions.

This manuscript focuses on the qualitative responses to one open-ended question asking participants to share any final thoughts about their experience as a social work leader. The qualitative data were manually analyzed using methods as suggested by Corbin and Strauss (2008). Data were then triangulated with quantitative results and qualitative findings of other open-ended questions—additional sources of data will be identified throughout the manuscript. As the research team continually engaged with the quotes and understanding the data, peer support and debriefing were utilized. As faculty and researchers with our own experiences in social work education leadership, we were mindful of assessing personal bias and reactivity, and included coders who were not members of the population of interest. Comparative analysis was utilized while simultaneously refining themes for meanings and patterns. When discrepancies arose among the research team, the literature was consulted and discussion ensued to come to a consensus regarding themes. Chronological notes detailing analysis were maintained to document how the three final themes emerged. The rigor and trustworthiness of the following findings are increased due to the use of the above strategies (Padgett, 2008).

Further analysis ensued to determine whether a social work education leadership model could be extrapolated from the data. The findings were analyzed within the context of the theory and concepts Peters and Hopkins (2019) evaluated in their scale development for social work leadership principles, Lazzari and colleagues' (2009) integrated feminist principles in leadership, and mehrotra's (2023) call to action for social work scholars to intentionally incorporate an intersectional queer praxis into their work.

Results

Study participants included 88 full- and part-time faculty and staff in US-based accredited social work education programs. Out of those who responded, 50 participants (57%) answered the open-ended question from which data were analyzed.

The majority of participants reported being in faculty roles (70%), with additional participants holding administrative roles (23%) and staff roles (3%). Participants had been in social work education for an average of 7.4 years (range 1-35 years). They were overwhelmingly White (80%), while 7% identified as Black/African American, 4% Latinx, 3% Asian, and 3% biracial. The majority identified as female (75%) with 23% identifying as male, and one each identifying as femme or mostly male. The largest age groups

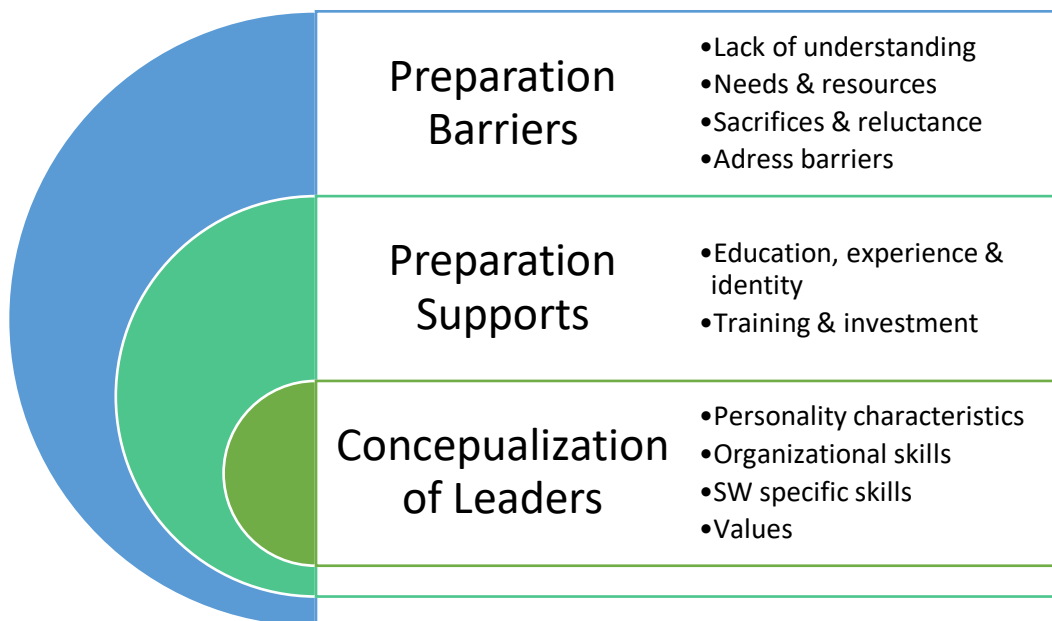
represented were 46-55 (34%), 56-65 (25%), and 36-45 (24%). Eleven percent of participants identified as a member of the LGBTQ community and 9% reported they have a disability.

Most participants were located at large universities with more than 10,000 total students (54%), with additional participants at midsize (24%) and small universities (14%). They overwhelmingly worked at public universities (66%) and were more likely to be at a Carnegie classified Doctoral (38%) or Master’s (36%) institutions as defined by the American Council on Education (2024). Most participants were located in the Southern (38%) and North Central (28%) regions of the U.S. as organized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (n.d.). The data analysis process resulted in identification of three main themes: conceptualization of leaders, support for leadership, and barriers to leadership. Each main theme also included two to four sub themes. All social identity characteristics used in participants’ quotes are their own descriptors.

Conceptualization of Leaders

Respondents conceptualized their understanding of leadership as a social work educator through role models, understanding the dynamics of structural politics of universities, and fostering organizational skills. Participants described social work education-specific leadership styles as decision-making within teamwork. The multifaceted nature of teamwork leads to the intention to foster others’ leadership development in the spirit of collaboration.

Figure 1. *Visual Illustration of Themes and Subthemes*



Leadership Characteristics and Skills

Fifty-three characteristics and skills specific to social work education leadership were identified through the iterative analysis process. Four sub themes emerged, including personality characteristics, organizational skills, social work-specific skills, and values as illustrated in Table 1.

Table 1. Skills Identified as Necessary for Social Work Education Leadership

Personality Characteristics	Skills		
	Organizational	SW Specific Skills	Values
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Authenticity • Comfortable in groups • Flexible • Follows through • Gives team credit • Hardworking • Honest • Imaginative • Innovative • Intentional about leadership style • Internally motivated • Intuitive • Respectful • Serves when asked • Thoughtful • Trustworthy • Understands what team members need for motivation • Willingness to accept success short of perfection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balance task & socio-emotional behaviors • Can say no • Delegation • Development/ Fundraising • Forward thinking • Goal & objective setting • Knowledgeable • Mentorship • Management • Marketing • Networking • Professional development • Risk analysis/ assessment • Strategic planning • Supervision • Team Management • Training • Visionary • Willingness to address conflict • Willingness to receive feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocacy • Apply SW values & principles • Eco-systems lens for assessment • Balances social worker & educator • Commitment to service, social justice, & human rights • Grounded in values • Shows what SW does as essential to the University • Understands how SW fits into larger scheme • Up-to-date on SW practice needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration • Communication • Democratic decision making • Fairness • Humanistic approaches • Teamwork

Personality Characteristics. Participants identified 18 personality characteristics important for social work education leaders. Descriptions of characteristics that benefit social work education leadership included a person’s ability to understand the role and work hard, but not need to be perfect. Other descriptors included honest, thoughtful, trustworthy, and comfortable in group settings. Social work education leaders should also be intentionally innovative while remaining grounded in their intuition. Flexibility was also described as important in deciding when to assert authority versus when to remain in the background allowing the team to shine. The term respect or respectful came up repeatedly.

Authenticity and confidence in oneself were presented as important within this theme. As one participant articulated:

...I am a thoughtful person ...I am told that I am fair and authentic, which makes my peers respect my decisions even if they do not like or agree with them. (African American, Female, Department Head, Associate Professor, Tenured)

Organizational Skills. Participants identified 20 organizational skills necessary for social work education leadership. Organizational skills are often taught through specialized training programs, frequently outside of the social work program curriculum, unless an administration specialization or track is offered. These skills include management, marketing, networking, conflict management, risk analysis/assessment, development, and goal/objective setting. Being able to delegate, have a vision, as well as balance tasks and socio-emotional behaviors in work were identified as important. Providing training and mentorship were other skills valued in social work education leadership, as well as being able to receive critical feedback. As one participant stated, "...I use my department to work with me to help brainstorm ideas and identify directions we want to go, then follow through to see where it will take us" (White, Female, Associate Professor, Tenured).

Social Work-Specific Skills. Specific skills frequently used in social work practice were described as applicable in social work education leadership. Nine social work-specific skills were identified by participants. The skills include advocacy, assessment from an eco-systems lens, application of social work values and principles, and commitment to service, social justice and human rights. A leader also demonstrates how social work is essential to and fits into the larger scheme of the university. As one participant summarized "Of course social work values and principles apply (democratic decision making, for example)" (Caucasian, Female, BSW Program Director, Chair, Professor, Tenured).

Values. Six values were highlighted by participants. Values were described as team collaboration, communication, fairness, and using a humanistic approach. Participants frequently highlighted the importance of a leader's team and democratic decision making. As one participant highlighted, "Leadership isn't about who's at the top, it's about those who sometimes move at the front as leaders, but who are also aware of the need to fall back behind to encourage the stragglers, forward" (White/Euro, Male, Associate Professor, Tenured).

Preparation for Leadership

Preparation for leadership in social work education comes in many forms. Respondents most frequently described preparation to include education and specialized leadership training programs. Social work educators see themselves as qualified due to existing experiences in leadership, willingness to serve, advanced education, and personal leadership characteristics.

Participants emphasized that social work state board licensure is not a requirement or pre-requisite for education leadership. Experience in volunteer and academic leadership roles in organizations such as CSWE and NASW have given participants the confidence to take on higher education leadership responsibilities. Specific to social work education,

participants described the desire to lead becoming part of one's identity as well as the intentionality to function from an anti-oppressive and anti-authority framework. As one participant stated, "social workers ... have been trained to lead from a position of partnership/collaboration as opposed to from a position of oppression/authority." (Female, Instructor, Not tenure eligible).

Participants spoke of the opportunity to lead and feel secure in that role depending on privilege and one's ability to connect with peers. With the desire and interest in being a leader, participants highlighted their training and personal experience as preparation for the commitment to leadership. As one participant expressed,

I was trained in... administration before becoming a social worker, that training has been instrumental in my marrying my social work knowledge and experience.
(Female, White, BSW Program Director/Chair/School Director, Not Tenure Eligible)

Respondents who were turned down for a formal leadership role most frequently described their lack of experience, politics, and lack of personal fit as factors. To qualify for leadership roles, participants also emphasized their University's expectations that future leaders be on a tenure track.

Supports

Participants, especially those from large, public, doctoral universities, emphasized that identifying leaders comes through an investment in people and continued training. As one participant highlighted,

It seems that time is one of the factors in academia, whereas skills and experience are more important in the agency. Fortunately, there are opportunities for leadership training, but a stronger focus on what...leadership means and look like would be helpful (White, Female, BSW Program Director, Associate Professor, Tenured)

Building relationships was another key component identified as peer support is critical to managing leadership responsibility.

The triangulation of data was used in analysis. When asked, "My social work education adequately prepared me to take on leadership roles," roughly half of respondents felt their social work education was adequate preparation for leadership (i.e., somewhat agree or strongly agree), while the other half disagreed (i.e., somewhat disagree or strongly disagree). The beneficial components of social work education were the general knowledge of the profession they learned, the administrative and organizational practices gained through their practicum experience, and the knowledge from policy courses. Participants in leadership roles volunteered Harvard Institutes for Higher Education Programs Leadership, CSWE Program Directors Academy, CSWE Scholars Program, NADD Leadership Academy for Deans and Directors, and HERS Leadership Institute as additional sources of training about leadership.

Being encouraged by other individuals supports engagement in social work education leadership. Existing peers' encouragement and leaders' mentorship had a significant impact in calling participants to leadership. Family support was another factor that contributed to participants dedicating more of their time to lead. Individual judgment of abilities and self-motivation were also found to be factors that encouraged participants to pursue leadership. Funding for leadership training, related travel expenses, and providing time away from the university also supported social work educators to consider future leadership.

Barriers to Leadership

Understanding what social work education leadership looks like was a barrier to success in these roles, especially within the hierarchical model and politics that exist within academia. Respondents expressed that ideologically conceptualizing oneself in leadership roles meant working within the understanding of the status quo of the management hierarchies and privileges that function through university corporate values, especially those at public universities classified as master's and doctoral institutions. As one participant who was interested in dean/director opportunities expressed,

Some of the barriers and challenges I anticipate are in the areas in which I do not like or don't want to be involved in, such as development and marketing. More and more, it seems that a dean's job is to go out and raise funds and market your program, as higher education is more corporatized... (Asian, Female, Associate Professor, Tenured)

Participants expressed a lack of desire to engage as a formal leader and the accompanying increased workload as a barrier to seek out the leadership roles available. Instead, participants focused on students by teaching about challenging systems, while at the same time adjusting to increasing classroom ratios that provide additional income for the educational institutions but not the educators.

Respondents identified bias as a barrier to leadership opportunities. Connections with current university leaders, who are frequently white men, contributed to participants' socialization into leadership, especially at predominantly white institutions (PWI). Lack of connections with current university leaders, especially at PWI, was a disadvantage for participants of color seeking leadership opportunities. As one participant expressed,

I believe that my experiences as a male of color who grew up below the poverty line in a field dominated by white middle class women provides me a good sense of perspective in terms of members of out groups and how they are discussed in our program. I have been challenged annually over the years regardless of whether or not I have been in a leadership position by both University personnel and my colleagues... (Caucasian/Latinx, Male, Associate Professor, Tenured)

Ageism was found to be a bias barrier when "older" individuals felt they were not given serious consideration by younger colleagues. Introversion as a personality characteristic was also identified as a reason why some participants have been passed over for leadership positions. One participant captured both sentiments, stating,

As I have grown older in my role, I have observed that even though I am more qualified than ever for leadership, I am more likely to be overlooked by younger people. That is disheartening in social work. I am also shy and introverted, so I am not noticed for my potential, and I am not likely to grab at opportunities the way more extroverted people do... I have felt overlooked and not recognized for all that I do and can bring to the table. (White, Italian, Ashkenazy, Irish, Female, Professor, Tenured)

When discussing leadership within social work education professional organizations, participants expressed that not being part of internal networks lessens the available opportunities as well. As one participant voiced,

Social work organizations seem, from my experience, to be quite adept at limiting leadership opportunities to fairly tight networks of close acquaintances and peers...[in] general it is who you know and who knows you... paves the way to leadership. (White, Male, Professor, Tenured)

Participants expressed time as a barrier to managing workloads and personal lives while working to achieve tenure and get promoted. With a lack of available opportunities for untenured faculty, they focus on moving to tenure status as a goal, before focusing on leadership opportunities and development. Educational preparation to develop organizational leadership skills was not readily available to social work graduate students at some institutions. There was a described gap in leadership, supervision, and management training in undergraduate, graduate, and doctoral social work education. As one participant highlighted,

So few courses address leadership among social workers...I never learned practical skills about supervision and management that are so important for being an effective leader. The most relevant skills that I have are related to goal setting, objective setting, and strategic planning...I only learned these organizational skills because I took extra macro courses. (Caucasian, Female, Assistant Professor, Tenure Track)

Without the resource and time investment from university administrators, potential leaders may struggle to function effectively.

Barriers also existed for individuals offered a leadership opportunity. When asked, have you ever declined a leadership position, or chosen not to pursue a leadership position, 33 participants stated that they had declined leadership roles. In the open-ended follow-up question, participants expanded that they declined leadership opportunities due to the projected struggles in managing the added responsibilities. Reluctance due to personal sacrifices was found to be a major factor for participants not actively working towards formal leadership roles, especially those at large, public, doctoral institutions. Additional factors included the increased time commitment and administrative work added to teaching loads. As one participant stated, "...when I do good work, I am presented with more work because I am trusted..." (Caucasian, Female, BSW Program Director, Director of Field, Not tenure eligible).

Participants expressed that within the demands of managing teaching and scholarship responsibilities, leadership roles often come with a personal cost. Other factors included lack of interest, inadequate resources, a dysfunctional environment, the need to relocate, not being able to identify clear benefits, and the role not aligning with social work values and ethics.

Preferring to support leadership was an option to build leadership skills for some respondents; while other participants declared leadership was not valued as worthy of one's interest or time. Achieving tenure was a hurdle for some participants who expressed challenges with managing their various job responsibilities. There was also an expressed hesitancy to take on the personal cost of leadership that may jeopardize future tenure and promotions. As one participant shared,

As a brand new, Assistant professor, I was asked to take over the administration of the Women and Gender Studies program... I said no to the opportunity. The chair of my department was quite frustrated that I did not take that opportunity... If I had taken the opportunity, it would have derailed my research, which would have derailed my application for tenure... (European American, Femme, Associate Professor, Tenured).

Another participant expressed,

The challenge to leadership is the slow climb. You step into an academic leadership role and it is difficult to exit and also difficult to advance. While leadership can be a great role, it often takes you away from teaching and research... If I could find a way to do both as well as leadership I would be more eager to take on that role (White, Female, Assistant Professor, Tenure Track).

Politics were overwhelmingly described as a factor that defines who is chosen and given leadership positions, especially at public master's and doctoral granting institutions. Participants were interested in leadership when invited but noted that organizational politics often interfered with leaders' ability to make decisions and enact higher level change. To put this into context of the larger study, the overall group were asked if anyone had suggested that they should take on leadership roles within social work education. Forty-eight of the 88 total participants reported being recruited for leadership. In the follow-up question, co-workers and mentors were identified as who most often made the suggestion, yet even with encouragement these 48 participants were still not willing to take on the formal roles.

Discussion

Implications for Social Work Education Programs

The findings highlight several implications for social work education programs. Leadership development begins long before social work program faculty and staff begin at a university. Leadership development begins with students at the bachelor's and master's levels and should be strengthened at the doctoral level as we prepare the next generation of higher education leaders. With only half of the participants reporting that their social

work education adequately prepared them for leadership, CSWE must consider whether to mandate curriculum specific to leadership development so students are ready to lead organizations and eventually educational programs (Peters & Hopkins, 2019). With the CSWE 2022 EPAS' emphasis on engagement of ADEI, leadership courses should have at minimum modules on feminist leadership and intersectional queer praxis as models aligned with social work values and ethics (Lazzari et al., 2009; mehrotra, 2023; NASW, 2021). Resources for curriculum development were previously curated by the CSWE Council on the Role and Status of Women in Social Work Education (2017) and offer a starting point for further expansion in social work programs. CSWE must also consider whether the minimum release time for program directors is adequate. A first step would be addressing inequity in the EPAS by increasing BSW program directors' minimum release time to 50%, equitable with MSW program directors' release time.

Although the respondents to this survey under-represented social workers of color and should therefore be interpreted through that limitation, we did find some patterns in responses related to identity. The responses captured in the *Preparation for Leadership* theme were mostly not tenure eligible participants with a combination of diverse racial identities. In contrast, the participants' responses in the *Supports* subtheme were mostly white tenured female educators at large, public, doctoral universities, while respondents whose responses were coded within the *Barriers* theme included diverse races, gender identities, and tenured status mostly at public universities classified as master's and doctoral institutions. The triangulation of these findings indicate that those who identify as white and non-Hispanic were supported to move into leadership more frequently than faculty of color, while racially diverse faculty with less status (i.e., not tenure eligible) are interested and prepared for more leadership, but often not offered such opportunities. This is especially important for public universities with an access mission; as the student population diversifies, so must the leadership profile. Individuals may feel more supported to enter leadership positions due to social validation related to their social identities, including white tenured females as they fit into the white culture of academia, while tension persists related to the patriarchal system that remains in most universities. Faculty and staff of diverse identities and not on the tenure track also benefit from encouragement to pursue roles from other educational leaders, as peer validation is motivation to pursue and thrive in leadership roles knowing they have supporters and mentors. There is a substantial need to provide training, help new faculty and staff develop relationships, and identify a wide range of individuals with diverse social identities to consider leadership early as they plan out their academic careers then continue to support and encourage them in formal and informal leadership roles. In addition, more research with a diverse set of participants is needed.

Participants also shared their university's expectation that leaders successfully navigated the tenure process. Tenure status is a privileged position to hold as it provides job security and academic freedom necessary in a political profession such as social work. Yet, the responsibilities and expectations of the tenure track may be in conflict with the responsibilities of leadership roles. This is not to say that holding a pre-tenure leadership position is not possible, as many have successfully done so and is sometimes necessary in smaller social work education programs, but these findings suggest institutions need

consideration of succession planning and supporting faculty in both their tenure pursuits and leadership position.

The tenure requirement for leadership must also be considered within the context of tenure track positions decreasing across the higher education landscape as universities increasingly hire temporary employees to teach. A decrease in tenure track positions paired with increasing temporary positions inadvertently reduces the future social work education leadership pipeline, especially the potential increase in future leaders with diverse social identities. Tenure remains an important component of university life and academic freedom, therefore social work leaders must find ways to maintain or increase tenure track positions within their programs.

Implications for Social Work Leaders

Social work leaders sit at the intersection of universities which are generally hierarchical structures and professional mandates for anti-oppressive and collaborative praxis. It is critical that social work education leaders analyze individual and systemic dynamics from a structurally competent approach (Avruch & Shaia, 2022). This includes examination of our roles within institutions which may not provide additional compensation for administrative work, hold expectations for unpaid service, often done by women and people of color, and the elimination of administrative support personnel in many institutions as cost-saving measures. From a structurally competent frame, social work education leaders must also advocate for leadership training and thoughtful succession planning as a step toward strengthening their program and supporting future social work leaders. Coaching with its focus on professional development, implementation of goals, and organizational processes (Rondero Hernandez & Douglas, 2022) is a way to transfer feminist leadership skills during times of transition. Current social work education leaders are also invited to provide transparency regarding the duties of their position with all unit members to offer space for any interested colleagues to better understand the responsibilities associated with the leadership role.

Leaders must lead with intention. Within our profession, leaders have a higher burden given their position and responsibility to model the implementation of social work values and ethics within their leadership praxis. Social work leaders have the opportunity to shift the current neoliberal corporate higher education model. We do not purport that this will be an easy or fast change. Organizational cultural shifts are difficult because universities are intentionally designed as hierarchical organizations. Even institutions with a mission to be more inclusive are challenged within hierarchies because job responsibilities often go beyond job descriptions and university politics make it difficult to pinpoint one's position on the social pyramid. Yet, if change is to occur, there is a need for social work education leaders to adopt a more intentional feminist model of leadership that incorporates intersectional queer praxis (Lazzari et al., 2009; mehrotra, 2023).

Proposed Model of Social Work Education Leadership Praxis

This research provides an opportunity to propose a model of social work education leadership praxis grounded in professional values and ethics, critical feminist principles, and intersectional queer praxis intended to facilitate change within the academy (Lazzari et al., 2009; mehrotra, 2023; NASW, 2021; Peters & Hopkins, 2019). The purpose of a social work-specific leadership praxis for higher education is an expansion of Peters and Hopkins' (2019) leadership principles intentionally applied to facilitate change which ultimately benefits service users (i.e., students). While Peters and Hopkins specify positive change, we acknowledge that whether change is positive is subjective and a leader cannot know if change is perceived as positive until after implementation and evaluation. Below, an initial attempt to conceptualize a model is proposed, but further research is necessary.

The proposed model of social work education leadership praxis includes five components: empowerment of the leader, faculty, staff, and students; promotion of organizational health; grounding in social work values and ethics; enhancement of organizational capacity; and promoting social work within the university. As mehrotra (2023) encouraged “build your theory, reflect, take action, reflect on the impacts of actions, and continue to refine as you go... [because] praxis has transformative aims” (p. 558).

Empowerment

The first component of social work education leadership praxis is the *empowerment of the leader, faculty, staff, and students* aligned with the program. Empowerment is a key component of social work practice, and aligns with participants' identified skills and characteristics. Many of the personality characteristics (authenticity, comfort with groups, flexibility, follows through, hardworking, honest, intentional about leadership style, internally motivated, respectful, thoughtful, trustworthy, understanding what the team members need for motivation, and willingness to accept success short of perfection), organizational skills (can say no, knowledgeable, mentorship, and willingness to receive feedback), social work-specific skills (balances social work and educator roles and up-to-date on practice needs), and values (collaboration and teamwork) aligned with Peters and Hopkins' (2019) leadership principles, Lazzari and colleagues (2009) feminist principles, and mehrotra's (2023) call for intersectional queer praxis.

Organizational Health

The second component of social work education leadership praxis is the *organizational health* of the program within the context of the larger university. Participants reported organizational skills (delegation, goal and objective setting, and willingness to address conflict), social work-specific skills (eco-systems lens for assessment), and values (communication, democratic decision making, and fairness) in line with Peters and Hopkins' (2019), Lazzari and colleagues (2009), and mehrotra's (2023) conceptualizations of leadership.

Organizational Capacity

The third component of social work education leadership praxis is the enhancement of organizational capacity. Organizational capacity is related to the resources necessary to develop and sustain initiatives that realize a social work education program's mission. This can include human and physical resources, as well as skills possessed by leaders, faculty, staff, students, and alumni (Peters & Hopkins, 2019; Toma, 2010). Participants identified personality characteristics (gives team credit, imaginative, and innovative) and organizational skills (development and fundraising, forward thinking, management, marketing, professional development for self, risk analysis and assessment, strategic planning, supervision, team management, training for faculty and staff, and visionary) aligned with Peters and Hopkins' (2019) and Lazzari and colleagues (2009) conceptualizations of leadership.

Social Work Values and Ethics

The fourth component of social work education leadership praxis emphasizes the inherent nature of social work as a feminist profession (Collins, 1986) that disrupts "neoliberal and normative assumptions" of the academy aligned with intersectional queer praxis (mehrotra, 2023, p. 556). Participants identified personality characteristics (intuitive, respectful, serves when asked), organizational skills (balance task and socio-emotional behaviors), social work-specific skills (apply social work values and ethics, commitment to service, social justice, and human rights; grounded in values, and up-to-date on social work practice needs), and values (democratic decision-making and humanistic approaches) compatible with Peters and Hopkins' (2019), Lazzari and colleagues (2009), and mehrotra's (2023) leadership concepts.

Promotion of Social Work

The fifth component of social work education leadership praxis is the promotion of social work within the context of the university system. Applying an eco-systems lens, social work education programs are one part of the larger university system that is influenced by other exo, macro, and chrono systems (Bronfenbrenner, 2004; Chiarelli-Helminiak et al., 2021). Participants identified organizational skills (networking) and social work-specific skills (advocacy, shows what social work does as essential to the university, and understands and promotes how social work fits into the larger scheme) in line with Peters and Hopkins' (2019) and Lazzari and colleagues (2009) leadership concepts.

Table 2. *Components of Social Work Education Leadership Praxis*

Component	Personality Characteristics	Skills		Values
		Organizational	SW Specific	
Empowerment	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Authenticity • Comfort with groups • Flexibility • Follows through • Hardworking • Honest • Intentional about leadership style • Internally motivated • Respectful • Thoughtful • Trustworthy • Understand what the team needs for motivation • Willingness to accept success short of perfection 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Can say no • Knowledgeable • Mentorship • Willingness to receive feedback 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balances SW & educator roles • Up-to-date on practice needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaboration • Teamwork
Organizational Health	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Delegation • Goal/objective setting • Willingness to address conflict 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Eco-systems lens for assessment 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Communication • Democratic decision-making • Fairness
Organizational Capacity	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gives team credit • Imaginative • Innovative 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Development/fundraising • Forward thinking • Management • Marketing • Professional development • Risk analysis/assessment • Strategic planning • Supervision • Team management • Training • Visionary 		
Social Work Values & Ethics	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Intuitive • Respectful • Serves when asked 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Balance task & socio-emotional behaviors 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Apply SW values & ethics • Commitment to service, social justice & human rights • Grounded in values • Up-to-date on SW practice needs 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Democratic decision-making • Humanistic approaches
Promotion of Social Work		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Networking 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Advocacy • Shows what SW does as essential to the University • Understand & promotes how SW fits into the larger scheme 	

Limitations and Future Research

Limitations within this research are acknowledged. As data were self-reported, participants may have had personal reasons to participate in a survey related to leadership different from those who opted to not participate, therefore all responses are assumed to contain some response bias. The participants in this study all work within the United States and future research should include social work education leaders from a variety of countries in other academic contexts. Participants were also slightly less diverse than the demographics as reported by CSWE (2020). Given that CSWE only provides data on social work faculty, not administrators and staff, we assume this to mean those in administrative and staff positions were less diverse than faculty, as other researchers have suggested (Bryan et al., 2019). More research should be done to examine whether these results hold true for people of color and others who were under-represented in the research.

Further research is necessary to document the social identities of those in management and administrative positions. While many universities, and social work programs in particular, have sought to diversify their faculty, higher education institutions must strive to have diversity represented throughout university positions, especially those who have decision-making capacity in recruitment, practicum placements, and management roles. Specifically, modifying Peters and Hopkins' (2019) social work leadership measure for applicability in the higher education host setting is an ideal next step to further this line of inquiry and praxis. Findings could result in identifying areas for improvement within social work education programs, to enhance leadership capacity, and identify curricular enhancements for students' leadership development (p. 107). Researchers are also invited to extend this research to include the perspectives of current university leaders, beyond just social work education.

Impact of COVID-19

The COVID-19 pandemic created limitations for this research in two ways. First, the onset of COVID required an end to data collection, which lowered the sample size and may have resulted in respondents who are not typical of social work educators. Second, since the COVID-19 pandemic began, there have been significant changes within universities and social work programs which are not captured in this data. Researchers will need to establish whether the findings here are consistent with the experiences of social work educators in a future still being reshaped by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Conclusion

The current research sought to examine factors related to social work faculty and staff decisions to pursue formal and informal leadership opportunities. The call to leadership is a need within social work education in order to fill leadership roles for program director, dean, and associate dean positions in accredited programs across the United States. Without the proper resources available, such as mentorship, potential leaders are left feeling powerless and overworked without the inspiration to lead. Social work education

leadership from a feminist perspective has the potential to challenge the status quo within universities and lead with social justice work at the forefront of praxis.

References

- American Council on Education. (2024). [*Carnegie classification of institutions of higher education*](#). Author.
- Avruch, D. O., & Shaia, W. E. (2022). [*Macro MI: Using motivational interviewing to address socially-engineered trauma*](#). *Journal of Progressive Human Services*, 33(2), 176-204.
- Bronfenbrenner, U. (2004). Ecological models of human development. In M. Gauvain & M. Cole (Eds.), *Readings on the development of children* (4th ed., pp. 3-8). Freeman.
- Bryan, V., Krase, K. S., McLaughlin, A., & Meyer-Adams, N. (2019). [*BPD emerging leaders 2010-2016: Identifying and responding to the need for new academic leadership*](#). *Journal of Social Work Education*, 56(2), 702-722.
- Chiarelli-Helminiak, C. M., McDonald, K. M., Tower, L. E., Hodge, D. M., & Faul, A. C. (2021). [*Burnout among social work educators: An eco-logical systems perspective*](#). *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 32(7), 931-950.
- Choy-Brown, M., Stanhope, V., Wackstein, N., & Delany Cole, H. (2020). [*Do social workers lead differently? Examining associations with leadership style and organizational factors*](#). *Human Service Organizations: Management, Leadership & Governance*, 44(4), 332-342.
- Collins, B. (1986). [*Defining feminist social work*](#). *Social Work*, 31(3), 214-219.
- Corbin, J., & Strauss, A. (2008). *Basics of qualitative research* (3rd ed.). Sage.
- Council for Higher Education Accreditation. (n.d.). [*Regional accrediting organizations*](#). Author.
- Council on Social Work Education [CSWE]. (2020). [*2019 statistics on social work education in the United States*](#). Author.
- CSWE. (2022). [*2022 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards for baccalaureate and master's social work programs*](#). Author.
- CSWE. (2023). [*2021 statistics on social work education in the United States*](#). Author.
- Council on the Role and Status of Women in Social Work Education. (2017). [*Resources for teaching and scholarship*](#). Author.
- Docka-Filipek, D., & Stone, L. B. (2021). [*Twice a "housewife": On academic precarity, "hysterical" women, faculty mental health, and service as gendered care work for the "university family" in pandemic times*](#). *Gender, Work & Organization*, 28(6), 2158-2179.

- Friedensen, R. E., Horii, C. V., Kimball, E., Lisi, B., Miller, R. A., Siddiqui, S., Thoma, H., Weaver, J. E., & Woodman, A. (2021). [A systematic review of research on faculty with disabilities](#). *Journal of the Professoriate*, 12(2), 1-25.
- Goodwin, S. A., & Morgan, S. (2012, May-June). [Chronic illness and the academic career: The hidden epidemic in higher education](#). *Academe*.
- Holosko, M. J. (2009). [Social work leadership: Identifying core attributes](#). *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 19(4), 448-459.
- Iachini, A. L., Cross, T. P., & Freedman, D. A. (2015). [Leadership in social work education and the social change model of leadership](#). *Social Work Education*, 34(6), 650-665.
- Lawler, L. (2007). [Leadership in social work: A case of caveat emptor?](#) *British Journal of Social Work*, 37, 123-141.
- Lazzari, M. M., Colarossi, L., & Collins, K. S. (2009). [Feminists in social work: Where have all the leaders gone?](#) *Affilia: Journal of Women and Social Work*, 24(4), 348-359.
- Lee, M. Y., Eads, R., Lightfoot, E., LaSala, M. C., & Franklin, C. (2023). [Current landscape of doctoral education in social work: A look at the PhD and DSW programs](#). *Journal of Social Work Education*, 59(3), 727-743.
- mehrotra, g. r. (2023). [How we do the work is the work: Building an intersectional queer praxis for critical feminist scholarship](#). *Affilia: Feminist Inquiry in Social Work*, 38(4), 555-569.
- National Association of Social Workers. (2021). [Code of ethics](#). Author.
- Padgett, D. K. (2008). *Qualitative methods in social work research* (2nd ed.). Sage.
- Peters, S. C. (2017). [Social work leadership: An analysis of historical and contemporary trends](#). *Human Service Organizations: Management, Leadership & Governance*, 41(4), 336-345.
- Peters, S. C. (2018). [Defining social work leadership: A theoretical and conceptual review and analysis](#). *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 32(1), 31-44.
- Peters, S. C., & Hopkins, K. (2019). [Validation of a measure of social work leadership](#). *Human Service Organizations: Management, Leadership & Governance*, 43(2), 92-110.
- Powell, J., & Kelly, A. (2017). [Accomplices in the academy in the age of Black Lives Matter](#). *Journal of Critical Thought and Praxis*, 6(2), 42-65.
- Prock, K. A., Berlin, S., Harold, R. D., & Groden, S. R. (2019). [Stories from LGBTQ social work faculty: What is the impact of being "out" in academia?](#) *Journal of Gay & Lesbian Social Services*, 31(2), 182-201.
- Rofuth, T. W., & Piepenbring, J. M. (2020). [Management and leadership in social work: A competency-based approach](#). Springer.

- Rondero Hernandez, V., & Douglas, S. (2022). [Coaching and social work: A strategy for developing leadership and the workforce](#). *Advances in Social Work*, 22(2), 856-875.
- Shigaki, C. L., Anderson, K. M., Howald, C. L., Henson, L., & Gregg, B. E. (2012). [Disability on campus: A perspective from faculty and staff](#). *Work*, 42(4), 559-571.
- Social Sciences Feminist Network Research Interest Group. (2017). [The burden of invisible work in academia: Social inequalities and time use in five university departments](#). *Humboldt Journal of Social Relations*, 39, 228-245.
- Spillane, J. P. (2005). [Distributed leadership](#). *The Educational Forum*, 69(2), 143-150.
- Sullivan, W. P. (2016). [Leadership in social work: Where are we?](#) *Journal of Social Work Education*, 52(1), 51-61.
- Toma, J. D. (2010). Building organizational capacity: Strategic management in higher education. Johns Hopkins University Press.
- Tower, L., Faul, A. C., Chiarelli-Helminiak, C. M., & Hodge, D. M. (2019). [The status of women in social work education in the USA: A follow-up study](#). *Affilia: Journal of Women & Social Work*, 34(3), 346-368.
- U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics. (2022). [Social workers](#). Author.
- Vito, R. (2020). [How do social work leaders understand and ideally practice leadership? A synthesis of core leadership practices](#). *Journal of Social Work Practice*, 34(3), 263-279.

Author note: Address correspondence to Shannon Lane, Wurzweiler School of Social Work, Yeshiva University, New York, NY, 10033. Email: shannon.lane@yu.edu