ISSUE BRIEF

Infusing Aging Skills Into the Social Work Practice Community: A New Look at Strategies for Continuing Professional Education

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As social work advances into the 21st century, dramatic increases in the aging of the U.S. population, shifting policy imperatives, and the emergence of new technologies have transformed the professional landscape in which social workers operate. To survive in today's world, social workers must be able to learn new skills and adapt to change. This article reviews the challenges facing the profession in transferring practice skills to social workers and describes the strategies of the Institute for Geriatric Social Work (IGSW) that address them. Well-designed training should provide a learning experience that is affordable, accessible and grounded in skill-based competencies. The challenge facing IGSW-and the broader social work community-is how to promote continuing education that maximizes these ends.

With the rapid aging of U.S. society, the growing need for provision of services and care for older adults has emerged as one of the most important challenges of the 21st century. The profession of social work in the United States is at the forefront of those who must take up this challenge and is also in a unique position to respond-both to meet immediate needs and also to establish a higher standard of care for the future. Obviously, infusing, strengthening, and expanding skills related to aging throughout the social work practice community is a crucial aspect of addressing this challenge. In this article, we examine strategies for transferring practice skills to practicing social workers and will draw from the experience of the Institute for Geriatric Social Work (IGSW) and its exploration of the challenges of providing continuing professional education in aging.

IGSW

IGSW, located at Boston University School of Social Work, is dedicated to advancing social work practice with older adults and their families. IGSW was established in 2002 through a 5-year grant from the Atlantic Philanthropies (USA) Inc. to improve the quality and increase the availability of gerontological social work practice by helping social workers meet the challenges presented by the diverse and growing aging population. Building upon the historical commitment of the Boston University School of Social Work to the gerontological field and the school's strength in gerontological teaching, research, and training, IGSW is now fully engaged in its work to provide social workers with the practice skills they will need to play a leading role in serving the growing population of older adults.

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...as the demand for social workers specializing in geriatrics increases, there will also be a growing need among social workers across every practice area to develop the skills necessary to work with older adults.

Central to its mission are IGSW's education and training initiatives. Through them, IGSW offers convenient, high-quality training to enable practicing social workers at the level of bachelor's (BSW) and master's in social work (MSW) gain knowledge and core practice skills in aging that they can apply directly in practice with older adults and their families. IGSW's overarching goal is to contribute to the development of effective training for practicing social workers, employing proven techniques of professional education and the latest in educational design. IGSW's initial training efforts focused on quickly developing a number of educational programs to increase the availability and accessibility of training in aging to practicing social workers across the country. These approaches include providing face-to-face training at conferences, social work educational programs, community-based agencies, and other settings throughout the country. IGSW also offers online training courses, Web seminars, and home-study courses, through which social workers can gain access to training at home or in the office. These courses are specifically designed to reach those practitioners who seek a convenient, accessible, and low-cost alternative to traditional face-to-face training. Over the past 2 years, more than 21,000 practitioners have completed training courses offered through IGSW.

Informed by these successful efforts, IGSW has laid the foundation to begin on its long-range plan for improving the quality and effectiveness of continuing professional education for social workers. Moving forward, IGSW will seek to raise the standards of training in the field by conducting research on training effectiveness, identifying the best practices of successful training, and developing training that maximizes the transfer of practice skills and practice-relevant knowledge, while continuing to provide short-term, focused training to social workers nationwide. As initial projects in this next phase, IGSW program initiatives include research projects to determine the best models of continuing professional education and a new small-grants program that provides funding to community-based agencies to organize and host innovative and sustainable training in aging for practicing social workers. Through all of our initiatives, IGSW strives to provide social workers with clear, concise training courses that offer essential background, practical tools, and resources to foster the development of practice skills.

Questions About Continuing Education

Although IGSW programs have increased the availability of training options for practicing social workers nationwide, we understand the challenge of using continuing education to improve practitioner skills through training. In this article, we will review some of the key challenges facing the profession in transferring practice skills to social workers. This is the essential mission of IGSW educational and training initiatives–How do we as social work educators upgrade the workforce of professional social workers to be ready to serve older adults and their families? As we have sought to develop prototype IGSW training offerings, we have discovered a need for clearer guidelines and standards to guide the structure and delivery of training in geriatric social work, as well as to refocus the emphasis in training on competencies, or skills, rather than on content. In this article, we explore these and other obstacles to transferring practice skills in aging to social work practitioners and present our strategies to address them. We first summarize the need for training in gerontology among social workers across many practice settings and describe what we know of the skills and knowledge deficits that need to be addressed. Next, we briefly review the literature and describe effective strategies for transferring practice skills to social workers and current challenges facing the profession in meeting their specialized training needs. Finally, we present IGSW's strategies for raising the quality of social work practice in aging through practice-focused, competency-based training.

The Need for Geriatric Social Work Training

The social work profession is now faced with a unique opportunity to take a leading role in responding to the demographic changes facing society in the United States today. Social work is distinct among health care and service professions because its practitioners are trained to consider the entire range of physical, mental, and social needs of clients. Social workers provide an array of clinical, case management, and advocacy services to individuals, families, and communities, all of which are essential for older adults (Rosen & Zlotnick, 2001). In light of the impending demographic changes in our society, it is certain that the services provided by social workers trained in aging will be critically important in responding to the growth in the numbers of older adults .

The Bureau of Labor Statistics has predicted that employment opportunities for social workers will grow by 27% between 2002 and 2012 and has identified the rising demand for social workers specializing in aging as a critical factor (Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, 2004). As the bureau estimates that there are 477,000 social workers currently in practice, it can be expected that approximately 130,000 new social workers will be required in the next decade, and many of them will be needed to work primarily with older adults.

Despite the critical need for skilled workers in aging, research shows that there is a severe shortage of social work practitioners trained to work with older adults (Gonyea, Hudson, & Curley, 2004; Scharlach, Damron-Rodriguez, Robinson, & Feldman 2000). Too few graduating social work students are specializing in aging. In 2000, only 2% of the estimated 15,000 social workers who earned MSWs that year selected aging as a field of practice (Council on Social Work Education, 2002), a trend confirmed by other studies. Gibelman and Schervish (1997) found only 16% of BSW graduates and only 4% of MSW graduates worked specifically in services for older adults. According to another, more recent estimate, about 12% of the 155,000 members of the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) indicated aging as their primary, secondary, or tertiary area of practice (Whitaker, Weismiller, & Smith, 2004). However, this number underestimates the actual number of social workers in aging, as not all social workers are members of NASW. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics' current estimate of the total number of social workers, roughly 12%, or 57,240, of practicing social workers are serving older adults (Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, 2004). These estimates point to a serious gap between the expected demand and the profession's capacity to supply social workers specializing in aging.

What is more, as the demand for social workers specializing in geriatrics increases, there will also be a growing need among social workers across every practice area to develop the skills necessary to work with older adults. As the aging population grows, social workers will increasingly encounter older clients in many practice settings, including health care, mental health, and other social services (Rosen & Zlotnick, 2001). Social workers from widely diverse practice settings and backgrounds will need training in gerontology that will provide at least the basic skills needed to work effectively with older adults. For example, social workers who specialize in family services and child welfare are likely to see a greater number of intergenerational families in which elders play an important role (Rosen & Zlotnick, 2001). Some of the specialized practice competencies required for geriatric social work practice include clinical practice intervention skills relating to caregiving, dementia, and managing chronic illness; conducting geriatric assessment of depression, cognitive impairment, and the need for assistance in activities of daily living; understanding normal processes of aging and basic health and psychosocial concerns of older adults; recognizing the signs of medication noncompliance and implications of drug interactions; and knowing basic resources for older adults in housing and eligibility requirements for receipt of services (Hooyman & Kiyak, 1999). The John A. Hartford Foundation has played a pioneering role in addressing this shortage by promoting several successful initiatives to provide education and scholarship in gerontology among social workers, educators, and researchers (Damron-Rodriguez & Corley, 2002; Rosen & Zlotnick, 2001). However, the need remains for training directed to practicing social workers who have already completed their formal academic training but require further professional training as they work increasingly with older adults.

Meeting the Needs of Adult Learners

What do we as social work educators know about the best ways to help social workers who have already completed their degrees learn new practice skills? The first and most critical step in answering this question is to formulate a model of adult learning for practicing social workers through which continuing professional education can be examined (Daley, 2000). Cervero (2000) succinctly frames the issue as follows: What is the problem for which continuing education is the answer? If the goal of training is simply conceived as keeping busy social work professionals up-to-date on the professional knowledge base, a relatively simple type of training model that emphasizes knowledge and information transfer will suffice. If, as we believe, the goals of professional education are more ambitious and seek to provide training that maximizes the transfer of practice skills and absorption of innovative and practice-relevant knowledge, a

more complex understanding of how to integrate both practice objectives and context into the construct of professional learning is required.

Central to the development of effective continuing social work education is the recognition that adult learners bring unique learning needs and preferences to their educational experiences. Adult learning occurs–to paraphrase several leading educators in this area–whenever adults engage in sustained, systematic learning in order to effect changes in their attitudes, knowledge, skills, or belief systems (Knowles, 1978; Merriam, 2001). Educational researchers recognize that simply informing adult learners of knowledge and research developments in the field is not enough to truly enhance professional practice (Daley, 2001; Garavaglia, 1993; Kirkpatrick, 1998; Mott, 2000). Rather, effective training strategies enable students to build new practice skills and reflect upon their attitudes and values as they relate to their work experience. Learning must be viewed as a dynamic, participatory process in which adult learners can relate directly with new ideas, skills, and perspectives that are closely linked to their professional practice. Particularly in the field of social work, practitioners rely on continuing education to provide them with the knowledge and skills they need to enhance their professional practice, to empower them to perform their role as client advocates, and to present opportunities to explore their values and reaffirm their commitment to the profession (Daley, 2001).

IGSW has identified the following key components of training models that promote the successful transfer of practice skills to adult learners in social work practice.

1. **Training Should Be Active and Participatory**

Researchers long ago established that adult students learn best when training involves a high degree of interaction, feedback, and exchange (Knowles, 1978). For this reason, educational theorists believe that learning is an active process, not a procedure to be performed on students. They have thus emphasized the importance of structuring learning experiences to allow the adult learner greater choice in their educational activities. Adult students learn best when they feel empowered, have the ability to direct their activities, and experience enjoyment and personal involvement in the learning process. Involving adult learners in an interactive, creative progress generates knowledge that supports unguided construction of more advanced knowledge, a process experts call self-scaffolding (Granott, 1998), which refers to the capacity of adult learners to progress to more advanced knowledge supported by the previous observations and training received; in other words, using existing knowledge to generate new knowledge. Effective training approaches that are based on these findings make extensive use of problem-solving activities that simulate high-challenge situations not unlike those that participants will encounter in the work environment (Carter, 2004; Garavaglia, 1993; Johnson & Aragon, 2003; Salas & Cannon-Bowers, 2001). Online training has created new opportunities for facilitating participant involvement. Web-based training can provide participants with greater choice in selecting how training is paced and reviewed and utilizing multimedia to simulate real-life practice scenarios in which learners can actively participate (Draves, 2002). In addition, synchronous training sessions such as live Web seminars allow the trainer to organize small group discussions and enable real-time interaction with students (Johnson & Aragon, 2003).

2. **Training Should Emphasize Practice Competencies**

Educational theorists have long emphasized that professional education courses need clear objectives, so that trainees have clear cognitive signposts to guide them during the session or course (Garavaglia, 1993; Salas & Cannon-Bowers, 2001). For continuing professional education for social workers, where at least one of the principal foci of training should be to help learners develop tangible practice skills or enhance problem-solving techniques, the training objectives need to be behaviorally specific and tied to practice skills needed for job performance (Kemerer, 1991). For instance, developing the assessment skill to differentially assess an older adult for dementia versus depression using the Mini-Mental State Examination is an example of a skills-based learning objective. These types of learning objectives can provide the

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framework for the training as well as the evaluation of the training's effectiveness in providing these skills. In the past few years, a number of groups have been active in identifying practice competencies for social work practice with older adults (Rosen, Zlotnick, Curl, & Green, 2000; Scharlach et al., 2000). Competencies, or skills, are not just behavioral; they also include the knowledge and attitude or values that will enable social workers to work effectively with older adults and their families. The most recent development in this area is the competency measure currently being tested by the Practicum Partnership Program, a project funded by the John A. Hartford Foundation. The 40-item Social Work With Aging Skill Competency Scale II identifies skill, value, and knowledge competencies in four areas: Values, Ethics, and Theoretical Perspectives, Assessment, Intervention, and Aging Services, Programs and Policies (New York Academy of Medicine, 2005).

In agencies or companies that are providing training to new workers, successful skills-based training often involves a prior identification of the competencies (knowledge, values, and skills) expected to be transferred to the job (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Curry, Caplan, & Knuppel, 1994). For example, the training of new workers in business often begins with an assessment of their skill and knowledge deficits and a subsequent training program tailored to meet those individual deficits (Hansman, 2001). Training for practicing social workers requires a similar linkage of needs identification and targeted training. The overarching objective of the training should be to identify individual practitioner values, knowledge, and practice skill deficits needed to meet the requirements of the position, and then to provide the conceptual background, practice context, training, and mentoring necessary to support skills development.

3. **Training Should Maximize Congruence Between Job Performance and Training Environment**

Educational researchers refer to the principle of identical elements to describe this component of successful training programs (Baldwin & Ford, 1988). This

principle predicts that the transfer of skills is maximized when there are identical elements in the training and transfer settings; that is, actual conditions of the training program (surroundings, tasks, equipment) match the work environment (Baldwin & Ford, 1988). For this reason, some of the most successful training takes place within the actual work setting (Kemerer, 1991; Salas & Cannon-Bowers, 2001). When professional continuing education is isolated from the work setting, the burden is on the learner to determine how training content can be applied on the job, limiting the potential for transfer. Although it is ideal to provide training on-site at the workplace, it is not always possible to provide training on the job, especially when staff members across multiple sites need to receive training in a cost-effective manner. Online training is emerging as a powerful tool to address this challenge, as new multimedia technology can be tailored to closely replicate conditions and practice scenarios employees will face on the job (Johnson & Aragon, 2003)

4. **Training Approaches Should Be Varied**

Stimulus variability is the term used by educational researchers to describe the benefits of using multiple approaches with adult learners. Research has shown that positive transfer of training skills is maximized when a variety of relevant training stimuli is employed (Davenport, 1992). Proponents state that when several examples of a concept are provided, trainees are more likely to see the applicability of the concept in a new situation (Kemerer, 1991). By using case studies and role-playing and critical-incident exercises, training can impel participants to think creatively about solutions, identify gaps in their knowledge, and consequently take full advantage of the knowledge and training available in the classroom. These strategies also enable participants to practice their new skills, encouraging them to see for themselves how the learning can be applied (Davenport, 1992).

5. **Training Should Involve All Members of a Staff Team**

Research demonstrates that workers who have received training separately from

Two types of Internet or online training have been provided to date–online training courses developed by others that we make available on our Web site and downloadable, article-based courses that can be printed and completed at the trainee's convenience.

the rest of their work group often experience difficulty employing the new skills in their employment setting (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Clarke, 2002). A trainee may develop innovative skills that could be applicable in the work setting but may be unable to employ them because other coworkers who have not received the training may not have the same skills and motivation to support and coimplement the changes. Moreover, a trainee's need to fit into the work group and cooperate with other employees is often stronger than the desire to bring about changes in the work setting (Kemerer, 1991). Together, these factors can create significant barriers to training transfer and highlight the importance of training a broader team of employees to ensure effective application of training. Online training has great potential to enable organizations to provide uniform training to all of their employees, as modules and Web seminars can be accessed by employees on the Internet at times and places that are convenient for the workplace and are easily adaptable to individual or group learning. The self-paced format of these courses enables learners to complete the course material at a speed that accommodates their unique learning styles (Carter, 2004; Welsh, Wanberg, Brown, & Simmering, 2003).

6. Training Should Incorporate Supervisory Support

Supervisory support plays a critical role in ensuring application of training skills on the job. The effectiveness of social work training is highly dependent upon the broader organizational context in which trainees work. When the organization has goals that conflict with or do not support transfer, it can become a major barrier to individual-level application of skills. A large body of evidence demonstrates that the most effective training approaches build in follow-up components to reinforce training material (Salas & Cannon-Bowers, 2001; Shin, Wehrmann, & Poertner, 1999). In the context of the transfer of practice skills, the role of supervisory support is essential and can include multiple activities, such as structured review of training material, goal-setting activities to encourage application in the practice setting, and modeling of target behaviors (Baldwin & Ford, 1988).

7. Training Should Include an Evaluation of Training Effectiveness

The ultimate success of continuing professional education is the extent to which participants are able to transfer what they have learned to their jobs. Educational theorists distinguish two fundamental markers of successful transfer: generalization and maintenance (Baldwin & Ford, 1988). Generalization refers to the extent to which trained skills and behaviors are exhibited in the work setting, and maintenance concerns the length of time that trained skills and behaviors continue to be used on the job. Evaluation is critical to determine how much of the knowledge, skills, and attitudes learned in training are transferred to the job; how useful the training skills prove to be on the job; and whether the skills obtained through the training are retained long after it is completed. Increasingly, evaluation is also being used to examine the impact of training within a wider systems context by identifying the way in which skills transferred to participants result in improved organizational outcomes (Kirkpatrick, 1998). In this way, evaluation can guide the development of more effective approaches to continuing education (Ottoson, 2000; Salas & Cannon-Bowers, 2001). Unfortunately, the effectiveness of continuing professional education of social workers is rarely evaluated, and more work clearly needs to be done to assess the ability of training to build skills, resulting in improved practice outcomes (Kirkpatrick, 1998; Salas & Cannon-Bowers, 2001).

IGSW Training Strategies

IGSW's education and training programs aim to provide state–of–the–art continuing professional education in aging for practicing social workers, using established and effective techniques of professional education. IGSW training courses are designed for practicing social workers at the BSW and MSW level, either those already working in the field of aging who want to enhance their skills or those in other practice settings who increasingly encounter older people and their families during the course of their work. IGSW courses are also appropriate for social workers who wish to change their practice focus to aging and for those who teach and guide social work students and practitioners.

Increasing Accessibility and Affordability

IGSW's initial training efforts focused on developing educational programs designed to increase the accessibility and affordability of training to practicing social workers. In the past 2 years, IGSW has provided training to over 21,000 practitioners using available technologies and training formats.

A principal focus of our education and training activities is to offer multifaceted Web- and computer-based training to practicing social workers nationwide. IGSW has identified Internet-based training as a primary strategy for increasing the availability and visibility of training that addresses working with older adults at the regional and national level. Research indicates that social workers increasingly rely on the Internet and have access to computers at work and that the Internet will be progressively used for professional education (Draves, 2002; Johnson & Aragon, 2003; Salas & Cannon-Bowers, 2001). For this reason, Internet-based training is targeted to practicing social workers in social service agencies as well as practitioners with access to the Internet in their homes. Two types of Internet or online training have been provided to date-online training courses developed by others that we make available on our Web site and downloadable, article-based courses that can be printed and completed at the trainee's convenience.

Online training courses allow us to provide free or low-cost training in aging nationwide and have proven to be an attractive option for practitioners. IGSW has offered over 50 Web seminars addressing a variety of subject areas pertaining to social work practice with older adults, including geriatric assessment, physical and mental health issues, older driver wellness, and family caregiving. Both live and recorded versions of these computer-based seminars are available. Using home or work computers, practitioners hear leaders in the field of aging deliver a workshop online. IGSW-sponsored Web seminars are by far our most popular training modality, and over 12,000 practitioners have taken them to date. Downloadable, article-based courses usually consist of three to five articles addressing a particular topic, along with quiz questions that can be read online or downloaded. This has proven to be an important option for social workers who do not have the time or resources to attend conferences or workshops or who prefer the convenience of receiving training in this format.

To date, 3,615 social workers have taken the downloadable, article-based courses, and we also offer practicing social workers the option of receiving these courses in written formats. For both types of online training, the registration, quiz, and course evaluation are completed online. Continuing education credits are available for free or a nominal fee. To provide our Internet-based training, IGSW has formed a partnership with the American Society on Aging (ASA), one of the largest sources of professional education in aging in the country and a leader in developing Internet-based training.

Since its inception, IGSW has sponsored training opportunities for social workers nationwide. Face-to-face training is targeted to practicing social workers who regularly attend conferences and those who receive continuing education at NASW state chapter conferences or social work education programs. Increasingly, face-to-face training will be provided at agencies rather than at conferences. Although not as cost-effective as Internet-based approaches, face-to-face training opportunities are emphasized here because this mode is still the preferred method of training for most social workers. Overall, IGSW has trained over 3,800 social workers at conferences, workshops, or agencies across the country.

IGSW efforts to promote face-to-face training include the development of two small grants programs designed to encourage NASW state chapters and social work education programs to provide training in aging to practicing social workers. Through the Training Incentive Program (TIP) and the GeroRich Training Initiative, IGSW provides grants of up to $3,000 to providers of continuing education to develop training programs to prepare practicing social workers to meet the needs of our aging population. These initiatives, supported by NASW, CSWE, the John A. Hartford Foundation-funded Strengthening Aging and Gerontology Education for Social Work (SAGE-SW), and GeroRich programs, offer incentives for NASW state chapters and social work education programs to become involved in efforts to prepare practicing social workers to meet the needs of our aging population. To date, 38 TIP and GeroRich grants have been awarded, and 1,000 practitioners have received training through them. Overall, we anticipate that 2,000 social workers will be trained through this program in 2005.

New Initiatives to Improve Quality and Effectiveness

On the basis of (a) our experience with the training we have developed, (b) a review of the current training available for practicing social workers, and (c) an assessment of the literature on continuing professional education, we understand the urgent necessity and challenge of improving the quality of training for practicing social workers. A few of the strategies IGSW is pursing to improve the quality and effectiveness of training for practicing social workers who work with older adults are described below.

1. **IGSW interactive, self-paced (ISP), online courses.** We will continue to make Internet-based training a cornerstone of our training activities. In a major initiative that seeks to address the issue of quality of the training available to practicing social workers, IGSW is developing a series of interactive, online training courses that we believe will provide improved training for practicing social workers in aging and indeed raise the quality standards of online training. Designed to incorporate some of the design components for successful training described earlier, IGSW ISP courses are specifically created for social work practitioners.

   IGSW ISP courses are self-paced, participatory, and interactive learning experiences that are informative, easy to use, and practice focused. Each course specifies skills-based learning objectives and attitude and knowledge objectives. Instructional methods are used that have been shown to enhance practice skills and encourage interactivity, assessment, and feedback. For example, short video clips that highlight practice issues are an important feature of each course and are easily accessible, even for users who have only a dial-up modem connection to the Internet. A forum feature of each course will provide access to a chat room on the course topic, allowing course participants to discuss the subject matter and build an online community of fellow professionals. ISP courses also include pre- and posttest assessments of competencies addressed to provide an assessment of trainee accomplishments.

   IGSW is currently developing online courses in the following topics: basic

issues in aging, mental health and substance abuse, diversity, community-based resources, housing and aging in place, elder abuse, end-of-life care, and ethical and legal issues in aging. Each course adheres to a standard outline including the following sections: (a) key background information in the topic area; (b) social work competencies required for effective practice; (c) role of the social worker; (d) current, evidence-based practice standards and interventions; (e) diversity and multicultural considerations; (f) ethical and legal dimensions; (g) instructional activities; and (h) resources and references. The first 6 IGSW ISP courses are now available, with another 8 in development. Together, they will highlight and provide effective, accessible, and inexpensive instruction and offer a comprehensive set of skills needed in the provision of geriatric social work practice that will contribute to a better-trained workforce in the field of social work.

2. **Curriculum guidelines.** New this year, we are also developing a series of curriculum guidelines in aging to encourage greater uniformity and higher quality of training in geriatric social work. In spite of extensive investment in gerontological social work education in the past decade, the quality standards for training social work practitioners in aging are at an early stage of development. There appears to be little consensus among continuing education providers, instructors, and credentialing boards as to what constitutes quality professional training in social work practice (Strom & Green, 1995). No specific criteria addressing training format, depth or breadth of content, or assessment of training effectiveness have been established, leading to wide variation in training quality. NASW has developed standards to regulate continuing education across the social work profession that recognize the importance of interactive approaches and the need to base training on adult learning theory (NASW, 2002), but no specific guidelines are provided to assist trainers with specific courses.

   Curriculum guidelines for practitioners, like those used in academic social work education programs, are designed to summarize the breadth of subjects to be

covered in a topic area and to provide instructors with a listing of readings and resources. Our curriculum guidelines will do the same but will be targeted to trainers of practicing social workers and are designed to promote the transfer of practice skills in important areas of geriatric social work practice. Each of the guidelines will be a summary of the latest research in effective intervention techniques and methods and will include practice-focused instructional aides and suggestions for effective training. The guidelines are designed to help raise the standard of practice-based training in these core areas by basing the training on adult learning theory, highlighting practice skills and implications of social workers, and including the latest in curriculum and instructional materials and resources. These guidelines will serve as the basis for all training courses supported by IGSW, including training funded through small grants and conference sponsorships. We are developing curriculum guidelines for each of the topics covered in our ISP online courses, using as reviewers national experts in social work practice as well as the authors for our online courses.

3. **Small grants programs.** One of our new initiatives involves the creation of a small grants program to identify best practices in training social workers in aging. IGSW recently launched the Agency Gerontology Enrichment (AGE) Training Initiative, a new small grants program to support innovative strategies for training practicing social workers in gerontology. This new initiative recently awarded grants of $5,000 to community-based organizations serving older adults that have developed model training programs for their staff. Through AGE, IGSW aims to identify service providers employing innovative training approaches in their local communities and to provide funding to enable them to enrich and expand their programs. The AGE program will also highlight the training programs of grant recipients through a national dissemination effort. For AGE, IGSW will provide technical assistance to maximize the quality of the training provided, to identify models of best practices in training practitioners, and to support the development of program infra-structure to sustain the availability of training in future years.

4. **Training videos.** Video is another effective media tool that has been used to train practitioners from a variety of disciplines. Unfortunately for social workers, many of the quality videos available to health care professionals in the aging field are geared to physicians and nurses, are issue-oriented (vs. skills oriented), lack a strengths-based or client-centered approach to care, are expensive to purchase, or are outdated. At IGSW, we are producing a collection of video kits that emphasize skills development and enhancement in working with older adults and their families. Each video will demonstrate practice skills in the form of role-playing between the social worker, client, and family. In some cases, the role of the social worker in the interdisciplinary team setting will be highlighted. Trainers will be able to use these short, 10-to-15-minute videos as part of their presentations. The kits will be composed of a video, workbook, and evaluation form. By making these training videos available for reasonable cost to individuals, agencies, and schools, we hope that trainers in traditional face-to-face and online training formats will incorporate these videos into their training, increasing the chances that effective modeling of effective practice can be provided.

5. **Research to improve the transfer of practice skills.** IGSW's efforts to assess, understand, and improve training effectiveness are just beginning, but we believe these initiatives have the potential to make a significant contribution to the training we provide, as well as the long-term education and training goals of IGSW. At present, IGSW is conducting several studies to evaluate the effectiveness of the training we support and to improve our understanding of the barriers to successful transfer of practice skills in continuing education for social workers. Our primary strategies to date include (a) an analysis of training evaluations, (b) a series of evaluations to compare modalities of training, and (c) a field study of agency-based training.

Analysis of training evaluations. The primary focus of our evaluation

effort is to assess the effectiveness and impact of our education and training on social work practitioners. This ongoing evaluation addresses three broad areas: (a) the effectiveness of IGSW educational and training interventions in reaching targeted social work audiences, (b) the effectiveness of different educational and training interventions in practitioners' self-reported gains in geriatric knowledge, and (c) practitioners' relative satisfaction with the learning experience by educational/training intervention method. Trainees at all IGSW-sponsored or -supported training are asked to complete a standard evaluation form that includes their demographic information.

Comparative study of types of training. Now that we at IGSW have experience with different modes of training and education, we plan to conduct multiple studies with social work practitioners this year to evaluate different types of training (e.g., face-to-face; Web seminar; downloadable, article-based courses). For each type of training provided, we will include evaluations that will help us to learn what worked and what did not work and what other information or help is needed. We are particularly interested to learn to what extent information and skills learned in the training have been used and proven helpful in practitioners' work with older adults. Areas that we will explore in these studies include whether the training enhanced attendees' understanding and acceptance of the need for and value of geriatric training and whether demonstrated acquisition of new knowledge could be attributed to a specific training type. Online learning, in particular, is an emerging area in continuing education in which little evidence-based practice exists. Through evaluation, IGSW will aim to identify Internet-based approaches that maximize the transfer of learning. As online learning continues to evolve, IGSW will work to identify and incorporate proven approaches into our own Internet-based courses.

Field study of agency-based training. IGSW's last initiative to understand the barriers and potential of continuing professional education is to work with agencies and evaluate whether and to what extent social work trainees are able to transfer continuing professional education into practice skills. Using our extensive set of online and downloadable texts and self-study courses, we expect to work closely with agencies on the design and implementation of training to address specific training needs and then to assist the agencies to evaluate the effectiveness of the training in increasing practice competencies.

Discussion

Continuing professional education for social work is at a crossroads. As social work advances into the 21st century, several phenomena have transformed the professional landscape in which social workers operate, including profound demographic changes resulting from the aging of our population; growing competition from related professions; and the emergence of new technologies, services, and resources. Practitioners in every setting are faced with increasing challenges to obtaining the new practice skills needed to keep pace with the latest developments in the marketplace. Moreover, these shifts seem to have hastened the pace of change across the profession, sparking a torrent of innovation that requires practitioners to update their knowledge and skills more rapidly than ever before. Social workers and the agencies that employ them must now make concerted efforts to ensure that their knowledge and skills are not rendered obsolete within this changing environment. Particularly in the field of aging, major changes have begun to occur across healthcare and social services settings as these providers prepare for the anticipated upsurge in the older population. To survive in today's world, social workers must be able to learn new skills and adapt to change.

In spite of the clear need for high-quality training to enable social workers to succeed in this changing environment, our review of the literature indicates that there is a growing recognition of a transfer problem in traditional continuing education in social work and other professions (Baldwin & Ford, 1988; Curry et al., 1994; Garavaglia, 1993; Salas & Cannon-Bowers, 2001). Estimates vary as to how much money organizations are investing in training, but the vast majority suggests that expenditures on training are increasing, particularly in

the area of online training (Welsh et al., 2003). Yet, there is little evidence that costs result in the transfer of applicable skills to the job (Daley, 2001). In fact, some evidence suggests that no more than 15% of training is actually transferred in the practice setting (Baldwin & Ford; 1988; Garavaglia, 1993). If the profession is to be successful in preparing social workers to meet the growing demands of the older population, continuing education grounded in proven educational approaches will be essential.

IGSW is committed to developing training programs in aging for practicing social workers that maximize the transfer of skills and advance the state of the art in professional education in aging for social workers by employing proven techniques of professional education. IGSW's initial training efforts have focused on developing a number of educational programs that are designed to both increase the accessibility of training to practicing social workers and improve the quality of training currently available. However, as social work educators, we know we must do more. Research shows that adult learners learn best when training is interactive and participatory; involves feedback, mentoring, and role playing; and incorporates specific elements that foster changes in attitudes, cognition, and behavior. Well-designed training should provide social workers with a meaningful learning experience that is skills-based, incorporates the latest in theory and research, and is affordable and accessible-aims that are often difficult to achieve in practice. The challenge facing IGSW-and the broader social work community-is how to promote continuing professional education that maximizes these ends.

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About the Institute

The Institute for Geriatric Social Work (IGSW) is dedicated to advancing social work practice with older adults and their families. Located at Boston University School of Social Work, IGSW will build upon the School's historical commitment to the aging field and current strength in gerontological teaching, research and training.

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