

## **Doctoral Research Assistants Panel: Discussion and Recommendations**

### **Amy Russell, LMSW**

As a member of a panel of doctoral students at University of Houston's Graduate School of Social Work, I wish to present my experience as a research assistant for the Office of Drug and Social Policy Research (ODSPR), working with Dr. Alice Cepeda and Dr. Avelardo Valdez. Not only does the assistantship benefit me financially, which is essential as a full-time doctoral student, I have learned a tremendous amount of both foundational and illuminating knowledge to impact and increase my growth in academia.

I wish to share my experiences as a research assistant in two manners, first academically and second personally. Academically, I have gained knowledge in critical software programs such as NVivo and Endnotes. I have assisted in editing manuscripts, data entry and data management, researching topics and literature reviews, and writing for grant proposals. Personally, the experience has exposed me to an academic environment that reveals the pressures of publication; the position helps to socialize me to the necessity of being an assertive learner, who takes advantage of opportunities for increased responsibilities and enhancement in research interest areas.

As a part of the panel presentation, I wish to discuss ODSPR and the present ongoing research projects the office is administering. Primarily, ODSPR is conducting a NIDA research study which involves collecting both qualitative and quantitative data on non-injecting heroin users in the San Antonio area. ODSPR also has numerous publications in the areas of Hispanic drug use, violence, gang involvement, and sex workers. ODSPR is committed to research and scholarship that benefits the Hispanic community.

Dr. Cepeda and Dr. Valdez have been supportive, generous with data, and guiding in their teaching and supervision. My research assistantship at ODSPR has afforded me numerous opportunities to not only further my knowledge in doctoral studies, but also to advance my ability in qualitative research methodology.

### **Shetal Vohra-Gupta, LCSW**

This abstract is being submitted for consideration under the research panel for the research symposium. Since the fall of 2004, I have worked as a research assistant under Dr. Monit Cheung. Last semester, the projects that I have worked on include: creating a theoretical outline for a book that Dr. Cheung would like to start working on dealing with multicultural counseling, researching several top social work schools and forming an outline of courses they offer in order to aid with curriculum changes at GSSW, as well as looking into mental health in India.

Dr. Cheung is working on writing a book looking into multicultural counseling and how the theories of social work practice can be applied to individuals and families of different backgrounds. The theoretical outline was based on the social work practice theories, literature review, and forming a case vignette for each minority group. In the course of the semester, I had also designed a study consisting of conducting focus groups with professors of social work in India. I had gotten in touch with several professors of social work in Mumbai, India to set up a focus group while I was there over the Christmas break. The study was set up to look into the perceptions and teachings of mental health in another country. A formal proposal was constructed and all paperwork for IRB approval was completed.

## **Discussion and Recommendations**

Duties, assistant perspectives, attributes of an effective assistant, and recommendations were presented. Research assistants answered a survey and stated their main duties were research and literature review, data management, writing and editing, software program manipulation, public relations, and clerical support. RA's also responded to the question of perspective from their participation in the RA position. Benefits were cited as mentorship opportunities, exposure to an academic lifestyle, networking, knowledge of software, expanded literature bases and grant proposals. Concerns were cited as lack of mentorship, clerical and technical tasks, unavailability of the advisor, demands of class work, and down time. Faculty who answered a similar survey reported that effective attributes of an assistant were strong conceptual abilities, strong work ethic and self-discipline, independence and initiative, timeliness and efficiency, motivation and endurance, excellent writing and editing skills, critical and creative thinking, and asking questions. Recommendations made were one-on-one mentorship, promoting RA's to publish and present at scholarly conferences, and knowing the RA's research interests and abilities.

Discussion following the panel's presentation revolved around student requests of advisors to spend time with them, provide feedback, give assignments that matched skill level, using students to assist in teaching, and allowing for pet projects. Faculty presented discussion on incentives for faculty to mentors, increased observant behavior in RA's to better meet the needs of the faculty advisors, sensitivity to the demands on faculty, better matching of disciplines to student interests, seeking out mentorship and committing time after hours to be with the faculty, and allow for spontaneity in the mentor relationship.