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## Postdoctoral Training for Social Workers: My Year at NDRI

Judy Fenster

Over a decade ago, in an article entitled *Research Training in Social Work: The Continuum is not a Continuum*, Mark Fraser and colleagues bemoaned the lack of training for research scholarship in schools of social work, and proclaimed that the “time had come” to strengthen postdoctoral training for social workers interested in conducting research (Fraser, Jenson & Lewis, 1993). Unfortunately, by 2004, there still did not exist an abundance of postdoctoral opportunities for social work scholars-in-training. When I heard that National Development and Research Institutes (NDRI)—one of the premier substance abuse research organizations in the United States—was offering competitive postdoctoral fellowships for junior investigators, co-sponsored by Medical and Health Research Association (MHRA) I eagerly applied. I was notified that I had been awarded the fellowship, thus, from June 2004 to June, 2005, I was a postdoctoral fellow in the Behavioral Science Training (BST) Program at NDRI. The BST program supports behavioral scientists looking to develop careers in advanced research in the areas of drug use, drug misuse, and health. Fellowships are funded by the National Institute on Drug Abuse, administered by MHRA, and housed at NDRI, located near mid-town Manhattan.

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Journal of Social Work Practice in the Addictions, Vol. 6(3) 2006

Available online at <http://jswpa.haworthpress.com>

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doi:10.1300/J160v06n03\_11

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The BST program at NDRI serves two populations—predoctoral fellows (doctoral candidates in various stages of working on their dissertations) and postdoctoral fellows (doctoral recipients in the early stages of crafting a research agenda). Fellows hail from a diverse pool of disciplines, including social work, psychology, sociology, public health, and related fields. Some postdoctoral candidates come to the fellowship directly from their Ph.D. programs, while others, like myself, had previous experience working or teaching in their respective fields. Accompanying the scholarship award is a stipend, which depends on the number of years of experience after completion of the doctoral degree. Postdoctoral fellowship appointments are initially made for one year and are renewable for a second year.

### ***STRUCTURE OF THE PROGRAM***

BST predoctoral and postdoctoral fellows would meet as a group, facilitated by our program director, Dr. Gregory Falkin. Discussions focused upon research articles we had read and we would comment on posters, and papers prepared by fellows for upcoming conference presentations. Seminar themes ran the gamut from working with heroin users, to ethical issues involved in conducting research with child participants, to conducting a factor analysis.

The group would split up for more intensive work on our original research projects, as we alternated presenting and critiquing drafts of our works-in-progress. Discussions focused on everything from which techniques to use for data analysis to how to write for specific publication outlets. Since our projects varied in stage, scope and design—the small group discussions not only served to broaden our research knowledge base, but also exposed us to a wide array of research topics and an interdisciplinary view of conceptualizing research questions. Dr. Falkin was also available to meet one-on-one to discuss our individual projects, to help us develop our individualized learning contracts (an aspect of the fellowship I found particularly helpful) and to track our progress in the program.

During the first six months of my fellowship, I enrolled in a 15-week class in Quantitative Research Methods at Columbia University and completed a four-day course at SPSS, Inc. on conducting quantitative analyses using the SPSS software. The knowledge I gained in these courses enhanced my ability to analyze data for the original research study that comprised the main focus of my work in the BST program.

In addition to working on my own project, I also met with several project directors at NDRI, to learn more about the research currently underway at the Institute. The opportunity to gain hands-on experience working with senior

staff was invaluable both for its mentoring potential as well as for the chance to network with experts whose work I had long admired.

### **WHAT I ACCOMPLISHED**

While I could not say that I became an expert in research methods in one short year, I did leave the BST program not only with fond memories, but also with a feeling of increased confidence in my research skills, a more clearly defined research agenda in the area of substance abuse, and a broader view of related topics. I also tremendously enjoyed the contacts I made at NDRI. I have kept in touch with several NDRI researchers I met while at the Institute, with whom I have begun to explore the possibility of collaborating on future projects.

At the end of the fellowship, I submitted to the journal *Drug and Alcohol Dependence* a manuscript based on the original research study I worked on while in the program. The article, entitled Characteristics of Clinicians Likely to Refer Clients to 12-Step Groups versus a Diversity of Post-Treatment Options, was accepted for publication and is currently in press.

### **CONCLUSION**

All in all, I feel very fortunate to have had the opportunity to engage in this very worthwhile experience. I would recommend the BST approach as a model for how postdoctoral fellowships for social workers could be organized. I agree with Fraser and colleagues: postdoctoral training for social workers interested in conducting advanced research is no longer a luxury but is rather a necessity for those wanting to stay current in the field and for those aspiring to compete for ever-shrinking external funding for their research projects.

To learn more about the BST Program at NDRI/MHRA, contact:

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### **REFERENCE**

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