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## Increasing Global Context in Social Work Education: Role of Internationally Experienced Faculty

Sarah Dababnah PhD, MPH, MSW  
*University of Maryland*

Sara Goodkind PhD, MSW  
*University of Pittsburgh*

Caren J. Frost PhD, MPH  
*University of Utah*

Jody K. Olsen PhD, MSW  
*University of Maryland*

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Increasing Global Context in Social Work Education:  
Role of Internationally Experienced Faculty

Sarah Dababnah  
University of Maryland, Baltimore  
Sara Goodkind  
University of Pittsburgh  
Caren J. Frost  
University of Utah  
Jody K. Olsen  
University of Maryland, Baltimore

Corresponding Author:  
Sarah Dababnah, PhD, MPH, MSW  
Assistant Professor  
University of Maryland, Baltimore  
525 West Redwood Street  
Baltimore, MD 21201 USA  
Email address: [sdababnah@ssw.umaryland.edu](mailto:sdababnah@ssw.umaryland.edu)

## **Abstract**

The infusion of global social work concepts into social work curricula enhances the educational experience and understanding of practice, policy, and research for students at all levels. Having faculty members who participated in global work augments the presentation of these concepts in ways that connect to student learning. Yet, no known research has investigated the role of internationally experienced faculty in promoting a global perspective in social work education and practice. One mechanism for obtaining global experience is through service in the U.S. Peace Corps, an organization that has been available for U.S. citizens to serve their country since the 1960s. In order to determine the impact of this type of service on teaching social work, we surveyed a convenience sample of Returned Peace Corps Volunteers in faculty or teaching positions at schools of social work on the connection between their international experiences and social work education. The majority indicated that their international experiences affected how they taught social work, understood the concept of “diversity,” engaged with students in field practice, and advocated for and supported communities. Over half the participants saw a connection between current CSWE Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) and their globally informed academic activities. More research is needed to investigate the perspectives of faculty with other types of international experiences.

## **Increasing Global Context in Social Work Education: Role of Internationally Experienced Faculty**

Social work as a helping profession and discipline of study is growing worldwide. Social workers are often engaged in practice with culturally diverse clients, systems, and settings (Link & Healy, 2005). Globalization, migration, and technology also have a clear effect on the contemporary practice environment. Accordingly, there is a growing interest in global social work, as evidenced through more international field placements and global/international concentrations and certificate programs (Pittman, Sugawara, Rodgers, & Bediako, 2015). Furthermore, the 2008 and 2015 Council on Social Work Education's (CSWE) Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) advocate for a "global perspective" and outlined student competencies to "engage diversity and difference in practice" (Competency 2) and "advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice" (Competency 3; CSWE, 2008; 2015). These standards have global relevance and are values shared with the International Association of Schools of Social Work and the International Federation of Social Workers. Indeed, given CSWE created a policy for higher education in social work to "provide an educationally sound experience for all students," it is imperative that global issues be addressed and integrated into U.S. social work programs (Rai, 2004, p. 214).

Despite growing awareness of the importance of global social work, educators have grappled with how to best train students for an increasingly culturally diverse job market (Pittman et al., 2015). According to experts in global social work education, the four essential areas for learning are: developing basic knowledge, comparing different types of practices, interpreting cultural parameters, and creating new initiatives (Rai, 2004; Simpson & Schoepf, 2009). Promoting these areas decolonizes the discussions about how to work with people from different countries and cultural contexts (Quashigah & Wilson, 2001; Razack, 2009). One approach is to simply prepare faculty, students, and staff to adopt a more global lens, which appreciates the blurred boundaries between local, national and international issues (Jackson & Nyoni, 2012; Rotabi, et al., 2007). Through enhancements, programs can capture "the nuances of multiple and interacting world systems" for the creation of globally appropriate, relevant, and community-designed interventions with diverse populations and communities (Rotabi, et al., 2007, p. 167).

Global activities are another method of enabling undergraduate and graduate students to have a broader, more open view of clients who are not like themselves (Tunney, 2002). Working outside one's country of origin can allow practitioners and educators to increase their understanding of social work across the globe. Global experiences augment teaching, enhance practice, frame research, and promote diversity. Furthermore, a global lens is important for ensuring the development of appropriate micro, mezzo, and macro frameworks in designing social work practice that is culturally and community-informed for the 21st century. According to the EPAS (2105), as well as research exploring the impact of global experiences, it is crucial to ensure that competent social work professionals view all aspects of social work via a global lens (Bisman, 2014; Wermuth, 2003).

Despite the clear need for students' exposure to global social work, little is known about the role of faculty, particularly those with international experiences, in promoting diversity in

social work education and practice. Riebschleger and Agbényiga (2012) developed a planning model to incorporate international content in social work field and classrooms. The authors noted first “faculty members must connect with people from other nations so that they may acquire the skills to assist students to do so” (Riebschleger & Agbényiga, 2012, p. 16). However, research focusing on U.S. university faculty has found only 10% engage in international scholarship (Lewis & Altbach, 1996), although more recent studies have found the trend towards non-U.S. social work research among U.S. social work scholars to be increasing (Lalayants, Tripodi, & Jung, 2009).

One defined group of social work faculty with international experience is comprised of individuals who have served in the United States Peace Corps, a two-year immersion experience in another country (Peace Corps, n.d.). U.S. citizenship is required to serve in the Peace Corps. Peace Corps Volunteers complete 12 weeks of training before serving in local communities and villages and working in a range of activities including education, health, and youth development. Three goals undergird Peace Corps Volunteers’ experiences: 1) to help the people of interested countries in meeting their need for trained men and women; 2) to help promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served; and 3) to help promote a better understanding of other peoples on the part of Americans (Peace Corps, n.d.). The first two goals focus on the Volunteers’ service abroad. However, the last goal encourages Volunteers to integrate their own international experiences into communities throughout the U.S. as educators and professionals once they return. While Returned Peace Corps Volunteers (RPCVs) have not been studied in relation to their experiences in social work education, they constitute a convenient sample of individuals with defined international experiences and training in the promotion of cross-cultural understanding and awareness of international social work.

For the current research, we explored how social work faculty, doctoral students, and staff with Peace Corps backgrounds (1) conduct practice, research, and teaching with a global lens, and (2) prepare students to work with people from other countries and in diverse cultural contexts. We surveyed individuals who were both RPCVs and social work faculty, doctoral students, or staff in order to address the following questions:

- (1) Do participants integrate their international experiences into social work teaching, practice and research? If so, how?
- (2) Have participants’ international experiences affected their approach to social work curricula reform? If so, how?
- (3) Do participants connect Social Work Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) to global social work and academia? If so, how?
- (4) What support, if any, do respondents’ schools or departments of social work provide for global social work?

## Method

We used both qualitative and quantitative methods to explore how social work educators in academic settings with specific international experiences bring their backgrounds to their social work education approach. We developed a 35-question online survey on Survey Monkey. Our research team tested and revised the survey, then we pilot tested the survey with colleagues and made appropriate revisions. We obtained research ethics board approval from the University of Utah.

The sample for this survey was Returned Peace Corps Volunteers (RPCVs) who live and work in the United States and Canada. To be eligible for the current study, participants must also have been a current or retired social work faculty member, doctoral student or social work education staff. Survey participants were questioned about the impact of their Peace Corps service on their current social work related academic and research priorities. The survey, which is available upon request from the first author, consisted of the following:

(a) demographics section of 11 questions;

(b) quantitative section of 17 survey questions focusing on areas of teaching, research, and practice; institutional support for global work; and the impact of Peace Corps experience on respondents' academic activities (including teaching, curriculum development and field-based activities); and,

(c) qualitative section of seven open-ended questions requesting more detail on globally informed teaching, practice, and research, as well as how U.S. Peace Corps service and the EPAS connect in the areas of teaching, practice, and research.

Recruitment emails were distributed to social work faculty, doctoral students and staff through the National Association of Academic Deans (NAAD) listserv. In addition, we contacted known RPCVs who worked in social work academia, and requested participants to distribute the survey link to other eligible RPCVs. The information from the survey presented below was collected over a three-month period.

## Sample

Table 1 summarizes key sample characteristics. The sample included 24 Returned Peace Corps Volunteers (RPCVs), 17 (71%) of whom were women, and 7 (29%) men. Their average age was 43.5 years, with the youngest participant 28 and the oldest 72. In terms of race and ethnicity, there was little diversity. Participants were asked to identify their racial and ethnic group membership with the option of selecting more than one category. All participants selected White/Caucasian and one participant also selected Asian American.

Over half (54%) of the respondents were Assistant or Associate Professors. Five participants were doctoral students (21%). The remaining respondents included Full, Adjunct, and

Clinical Professors and Instructors, as well as one staff member. Of the 19 faculty/staff respondents, there was an average of eight years on faculty, with a range of two to 24 years. The majority of the sample (58%) held a doctoral degree, nine (38%) had a master's degree as their highest degree, and one (4%) had a bachelor's degree as their highest degree.

All but one respondent, whose work was exclusively research-based, had some teaching responsibilities. Respondents could select all programs in which they taught. Nearly all (88%) participants taught in an MSW program, whereas just under half (46%) were in a BSW program and one in a PhD program. The respondents taught in a range of educational areas, including clinical practice (50%), policy (33%), macro practice (29%), research (25%), and human behavior (21%). Approximately one-fifth of respondents also taught globally focused courses, and 13% diversity/social justice courses. Participants reported several research focus areas, including aging/gerontology, community organization/development, international social work, child protection/welfare, poverty/homelessness, social work education, policy practice, environment/climate change, program evaluation, nonprofit theory and policy, and civic engagement, among others.

All but one of the respondents served in the Peace Corps only once (one served twice). In addition to serving as a Volunteer, one respondent was a Volunteer coordinator, and another respondent was a Peace Corps staff member. The majority of respondents served during the 1990s and 2000s (88%). Five (21%) respondents had a social work degree prior to entering the Peace Corps. Respondents served all around the world, with 12 serving in the Caribbean or Latin America, seven in Africa, six in Asia or the South Pacific, and one in Europe. Two respondents served in two separate countries each. The RPCVs worked in several areas of Peace Corps service, particularly in health/nutrition and education (math, science, or English).

## **Results**

The majority of respondents ( $n = 22$ ; 92%) reported their international experiences in Peace Corps had framed their teaching approach. These experiences provided links to real world experiences and dilemmas (79.2%); and informed class activities (54%), assignments (33%) and syllabi creation (21%). One Returned Peace Corps Volunteer (RPCV) said:

When I talk about Peace Corps with my students – anyone really – my experiences illustrate broad, life-changing shifts in thinking that, though challenging, help solidify my commitment to social work values and ethics. For those with limited cultural experiences, these insights can be revolutionary, yet awe-inspiring.

Study participants reported their global work influenced social work education by assisting instructors to broaden the definition of diversity (87.5%), increase awareness of social issues (87.5%), allow for an advocacy orientation (58.3%), and link to policy needs (50%). Related to increasing the understanding of “diversity,” one respondent noted:

My Peace Corps experience taught me cultural humility and allowed me to understand diversity from an entirely new perspective. I have never lived as a minority outside of my time in [Peace Corps], but I better understand the feeling of being defined by what makes you different and the pressures of being asked to represent an entire population. I work now to help people understand that diversity is not about having a variety of races, sexual orientations, abilities, etc. present, but rather making those different identities feel comfortable and welcomed. Diversity is inclusion, not difference.

Apart from teaching, the majority of participants ( $n = 20$ ; 83%) reported their Peace Corps experiences had influenced other areas of social work, such as policy changes (41.7%), research activities (37.5%) and curricula development (29.2%). Three-quarters of respondents noted their Peace Corps service was related to their current service at their respective schools/departments of social work, such as helping to inform their colleagues about global issues (66.7%), advocacy efforts (62.5%), community engagement (58.3%) and committee activities (41.7%). Several RPCVs discussed how their international experiences drove their desire to pursue social work and to engage in local service opportunities in the U.S. As one respondent explained:

First, [my Peace Corps] experience led me to become a social worker. Second, the confidence I have with culturally diverse populations is candid, unrehearsed, and natural... Third, because of the self-starter, strong initiative skill building one develops as a volunteer, resiliency is almost innate. Major hurdles or struggles are still stressful, but the idea that I can overcome obstacles is firmly rooted.

In addition to academic activities within RPCVs' respective universities and communities, respondents noted their international experiences had impacted their current social work practice (66.7%), particularly with the ability to relate with others outside of their own cultures. For example, one RPCV explained that Peace Corps "helped me understand that one's cultural worldview is subtle but pervasive, and that without stepping 'outside' of your culture, this is very hard to appreciate." This impact was not only related to RPCVs' own practice, but infused into their work with students in social work field placements. The importance of building relationships, and modeling this skill to students, is critical, as one RPCV said, "When I visit my social work students at their field placements each semester, I remember how important it is to have the human connection and to stay focused and centered during these visits. This is very much connected to my Peace Corps experience."

Survey respondents were provided with three specific 2008 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) related to Peace Corps goals. These standards were (2.1.4) engage diversity and difference in practice, (2.1.5) advance human rights and social and economic justice, and (2.1.9) respond to contexts that shape practice. Over half ( $n = 14$ ; 58%) of the respondents saw a link between these standards, their global experiences, and current academic work, with one explaining:

Yes, I am very aware of the impact of others who enter a context trying to fix things, when in fact, the best solution might come from within the community itself. I am always concerned with how



my work, both research and teaching, address social justice and human rights, cornerstones of social work.

Lastly, we questioned RPCVs regarding their institutional and school- or department-level support of global activities. The vast majority of respondents ( $n = 22$ ; 91.2%) said their institution (i.e., their university at large) supported international initiatives. The most common global activities reported were study abroad/field practica abroad (33.3%) or specific global programs/courses (20.8%). Some institutions also supported faculty travel (12.5%) and global partnerships (12.5%). Compared with those reporting that their institutions supported international activities, a slightly smaller proportion of RPCVs ( $n = 18$ ; 75%) reported that their social work schools/departments supported global activities. The types of support received from social work schools/departments included funding for global work (45.8%), course releases/buy-outs (8.3%), and student study abroad opportunities (8.3%).

## **Discussion**

In order to properly evaluate the results of this study, its limitations must be addressed. First, nearly all the respondents were White and almost three quarters were female (71%). While an analysis of CSWE data found 64% of social work faculty members are female and 70% White (Sakamotoa, Anastas, McPhail & Colarossi, 2008), our sample was nonetheless not fully representative of the diversity of social work educators. Second, the study was directed toward Returned Peace Corps Volunteers (RPCVs), one specific and yet limited group of social work faculty with international experiences. This group was selected because of the definable parameters of their international experience, important for an initial study on the topic. However, future research should include faculty with other types of international experiences. Third, because Peace Corps Volunteers must be U.S. citizens at time of service, the study was limited to faculty members with U.S. citizenship. Finally, our small sample size precluded the use of advanced inferential statistics, limiting our ability to examine the relationship between specific characteristics of the respondents and the degree to which they integrated their past global experiences into their current academic roles. Even with these limitations, our research lays the groundwork for further study of social work faculty with international experiences and their impact on social work education.

The current study builds on the small body of extant research focusing on the promotion of global social work education. We surveyed a group of social work faculty and doctoral students with known international experience in the Peace Corps. The 24 respondents in schools and departments of social work in the U.S. and Canada described various ways in which their global experiences impacted their current teaching, practice, community engagement, and advocacy efforts. In particular, these RPCVs emphasized how their commitment to the third goal of Peace Corps – bringing their international experiences home to the U.S. – improved their ability to address complex cross-cultural issues and teach students critical problem-solving skills within diverse populations.

Several respondents indicated that they teach international and global social work courses and referenced their particular interest in doing so. In addition, nearly all of the respondents

indicated their Peace Corps experience informed their overall teaching approach, their own understanding of the complexities of diversity, and their awareness and response to specific social issues. They brought their unique experiences to the classroom to augment regular material and to add nuance and specificity to these topics. Respondents noted that they worked with faculty colleagues to strengthen social work's emphases on diversity, international and global social work, service, and macro practice. These emphases meet the EPAS related to international, diversity and social justice and are gaining prominence in social work education programs at both the bachelors and masters levels.

Beyond classroom teaching and other academic activities, the respondents drew a connection between their international experiences and social work practice. More than half of the sample reported their Peace Corps service affected the way in which they approached community outreach and supported students in their field placements, particularly emphasizing skills in relationship building and cross-cultural understanding. These activities suggest the participants were responding to the third goal of Peace Corps, by utilizing skills gained from their international experiences within their local communities and institutions.

Finally, we questioned respondents on the level of support for international activities at their respective universities, schools, and departments. While not a representative sample, we found most of the participants reported some support from both their university and school or department of social work. This support was mostly in the form of study abroad programs, although fewer respondents reported study abroad opportunities within their schools or departments of social work. Future research should investigate the types of funding resources available to social work faculty members and students for global research, practice, and advocacy work.

### **Implications for Social Work Practice and Research**

The U.S. population is rapidly diversifying, particularly among younger cohorts (Shrestha & Heisler, 2011). Social work educators must meet the changing professional demands brought by the new generations of social workers, both students themselves who represent this diversity and the vulnerable populations most social workers will serve. Faculty with increasingly diverse experiences, including in other languages, cultures, and countries, bring depth to curricula development, internships, teaching, and related research to diverse student populations, as well as giving additional insights to students about effectively responding to new generations of patients, clients, and community groups.

Demographic changes affect how the field of social work responds to specific vulnerable population needs and advocates on their behalf: national becomes global, and social justice becomes human rights. With both global communication and population movement across national borders, the divisions between and among countries and regions are diminishing. Faculty with international experience can bring global case studies based on their experiences, international networks of professional and organizational resources, and examples of problem-solving models commonly used in other cultural settings, all of which offer broadened parameters for expanding

social work's relevance and leadership in an integrated global environment challenging the profession every day.

In conclusion, this study begins to outline the assets faculty members with two-year community integrative international experience bring to social work education. The survey offered respondents opportunities to describe their experiences and perspectives related to teaching, designing internationally related coursework, developing study abroad type experiences, diversifying internships, and introducing cross-national and cultural research. Given the constraints of the current study's small sample, future studies should engage more participants, both faculty and students, with different types of international backgrounds, and continue to explore the most prominent points of influence these experiences have in field of social work, as it broadens its outreach to vulnerable populations both at home and abroad.

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Table 1  
*Sample Characteristics (N = 24)*

|                       |                     | <i>n</i> | <i>Percentage</i> |
|-----------------------|---------------------|----------|-------------------|
| <i>Gender</i>         | Female              | 17       | 71.0%             |
|                       | Male                | 7        | 29.0%             |
| <i>Race</i>           | White               | 23       | 95.8%             |
|                       | White/Asian         | 1        | 4.2%              |
| <i>Academic Rank</i>  | Assistant Professor | 7        | 29.2%             |
|                       | Associate Professor | 6        | 25%               |
|                       | Full Professor      | 1        | 4.2%              |
|                       | Clinical Instructor | 2        | 8.3%              |
|                       | Adjunct Instructor  | 2        | 8.3%              |
|                       | Administrator       | 1        | 4.2%              |
|                       | Doctoral Student    | 5        | 20.8%             |
| <i>Highest Degree</i> | Bachelor's          | 1        | 4.2%              |
|                       | Master's            | 9        | 37.5%             |
|                       | Doctoral            | 14       | 58.3%             |