Managing and Mentoring: Experiences of Assistant Professors in Working with Research Assistants

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Support from research assistants (RAs) is often framed as a resource to facilitate faculty research productivity, yet most assistant professors have received minimal training on how to effectively make use of this resource. This study collected data from a national sample of assistant professors to examine tasks RAs are asked to perform, satisfaction with RA work, challenges in working with RAs, and lessons learned to be successful. Authors used a sequential mixed-methods design, first conducting a Web-based survey with 109 assistant professors in social work schools with doctoral programs, then qualitative interviews with a subset of 13 respondents who volunteered to talk more about their experiences. Evidence indicated low levels of satisfaction regarding the preparation of students for RA work, particularly among those assistant professors working with first-year doctoral students. Primary challenges included lack of student skills and commitment and sufficient time to supervise and train students. Recommendations include careful assessment of student skills at the start of the relationship and setting clear expectations. Social work programs can improve faculty–RA relationships by training new assistant professors on how to support and manage RAs and training incoming students on basic research skills for their work as RAs.

KEY WORDS: *assistant professors; mentoring; research assistants; students; supervision*

In the 2010–2011 academic year, 321 doctoral degrees were awarded in social work, and almost one-third of these graduates ($n = 102$) accepted a tenure-track faculty position at a college or university (Council on Social Work Education, n.d.). In a survey of social work programs, 95% anticipated that they would be hiring in the next five years, and 27% expected to hire four or more faculty (Barsky, Green, & Ayayo, 2014). One benefit routinely offered to new faculty is the opportunity to have research assistant (RA) support, ideally to assist them in launching their programs of research. Because scholarly productivity is a key element for successfully gaining tenure at many institutions, RAs can be a resource for increasing productivity for tenure-track assistant professors. But mentoring and working with an RA involves specific skills that are seldom taught as part of doctoral training. This article explores the experiences of tenure-track assistant professors at social work schools and how they work with RAs. In it we describe how new professors use this resource, identify challenges and issues they encounter, and suggest strategies to effectively overcome these challenges.

Understanding how RA support can contribute to research productivity is especially critical for tenure-track assistant professors because promotion and tenure are frequently tied to publication productivity. Although we found no empirical evidence from the social work literature on this topic, studies from other disciplines have found an association between faculty use of RAs and journal publication productivity (Burke & James, 2005; Hancock, Lane, Ray, & Glennon, 1992; Levitan & Ray, 1992; White, James, Burke, & Allen, 2012). One study of faculty productivity in business schools found that doctoral student support positively predicted the number of research awards received and book chapters and journal articles published (Burke & James, 2005). A large survey of scientific publishing among Norwegian faculty found a positive correlation between the numbers of graduate students supervised and published article productivity (Kyvik & Smeby, 1994). RAs have been described as “research facilitators” (Cargile & Bublit, 1986; Chow & Harrison, 1998), and involving RAs in faculty research was associated with getting published in the most influential

journals among accounting faculty (Valle & Schultz, 2011).

These studies offer some evidence that RAs can benefit faculty research productivity, but provide limited information about the specific mechanisms that influence the relationship between research productivity and having RAs. One reason for gains in productivity identified in prior research is that having RAs frees professor time to conduct research and write (Boyer & Cockriel, 2001), because more mundane and time-consuming tasks such as transcription and copying can be delegated (Nippold, 2010; White et al., 2012). It is likely, however, that a variety of other factors contribute to a positive and productive working relationship between RAs and assistant professors. Prior research on faculty relationships with RAs has identified challenges in negotiating these relationships. One study from two decades ago identified common challenges, including establishing boundaries, motivating, providing support, having effective communication, and maintaining a professional relationship (Hockey, 1994). These challenges may be even greater today as technology has increased the options for communication and the expectation of responsiveness.

There is currently little information in the literature to provide guidance for new professors on working with RAs, especially for the field of social work. No studies were identified that fully explored the benefits and challenges of working with RAs or provided guidance for new professors looking to effectively use RAs to support their work. In addition, no studies have examined what type of preparation is needed for successful relationships. Our study seeks to fill these gaps using a sample of tenure-track social work assistant professors to answer the following four questions: (1) How do assistant professors use RAs to support their work? (2) How satisfied are assistant professors with their RAs and does satisfaction vary by level of preparation for the student or the professor? (3) What challenges do assistant professors experience in working with RAs? and (4) What lessons have assistant professors learned to overcome these challenges? Understanding the answers to these questions can provide guidance for new assistant professors, doctoral students, and the programs that support them to facilitate productive faculty-RA relationships.

METHOD

Data were collected using a sequential mixed-methods approach (Hanson, Creswell, Clark, Petska, & Creswell,

2005), first gathering quantitative survey data, then conducting qualitative interviews with a subset of survey respondents who volunteered to discuss their experiences in depth. The quantitative data were collected through a Web-based survey in the fall of 2013. The qualitative data were collected in the spring of 2014 through telephone interviews that explored assistant professors' experiences working with RAs. The university institutional review board (IRB) approved all research materials and procedures.

Quantitative Approach

The sampling frame included all tenure-track assistant professors at schools of social work that are members of the Group for the Advancement of Doctoral Education (GADE). Assistant professors were identified on the basis of their listing on each school's Web page. Links to a Web-based survey created using Qualtrics, a program designed for creating electronic surveys, were sent to all assistant professors identified ($n = 375$). We also sent the survey link to the doctoral program director at each of the member schools as listed on the GADE Web site and asked them to forward it to tenure-track assistant professors at their schools. The final response rate of 36% ($n = 135$) is slightly higher than response rates for Web-based surveys reported in prior work (Kaplowitz, Hadlock, & Levine, 2004). Respondents were screened in the first questions of the survey for the inclusion criteria of being a tenure-track assistant professor and having worked with an RA since being hired in that position. Of the overall respondents, 81% were deemed eligible ($n = 109$).

Survey items asked about demographic characteristics including school size and type, years as an assistant professor, and teaching load. To determine how professors use RAs, we asked them to rate how often they ask students to do a list of tasks and to add other tasks we had not identified. To examine prior preparation for working with RAs we asked whether respondents had experience supervising RAs prior to their tenure-track position and if they had completed a postdoctoral fellowship. We included postdoctoral training as an indicator of preparation because these assistant professors have had more prior experience, which allowed them focused time to organize their research and identify areas where student help was needed. To assess students' prior preparation, professors were asked whether their school provided any training specific to RA duties and the RA's educational level (whether MSW student,

first-year doctoral student, or second- or third-year doctoral student). A stem question asked professors to rate their level of satisfaction with aspects of their first RA's work and relationship on a scale from 1 to 10. We collapsed responses for analysis into low satisfaction (1 to 3), moderate satisfaction (4 to 6), and high satisfaction (7 to 10). Participants also responded to open-ended questions asking them to identify their three greatest challenges in working with RAs and the lessons they have learned in working with RAs.

Qualitative Approach

Survey respondents were asked to provide contact information if they were willing to participate in a qualitative interview. We chose 15 of the 42 respondents who indicated willingness to participate using a random number generator. The qualitative sample size was based on the relatively homogenous nature of our population and prior work that has suggested saturation is often found after 12 interviews (Guest, Bunce, & Johnson, 2006). We attempted to contact all 15 and were successful in completing 13 telephone interviews. A semistructured interview guide, developed by the interviewers (Narendorf, Small, and Berger Cardoso), was used to elicit the faculty members' prior experiences and training in working with RAs. Topics of the interview guide included general experiences and background, starting the relationship, strengths of RAs, challenges with RAs, strategies, success, and advice for other assistant professors. Extensive notes were taken and written into a detailed interview summary immediately following each interview.

Sample

Our survey respondents primarily came from large public universities and were generally representative of our sampling frame. Three-quarters were from public universities (75%), a slightly higher number than the percentage contacted in the initial sampling frame (68%), but in both the sample and the sampling frame 70% were employed at schools with 20,000 or more students. Almost three-quarters (74%) of respondents reported receiving RA support as part of their faculty start-up package. Over half had some experience in supervising RAs prior to becoming an assistant professor, and 27% had completed postdoctoral training. Further details of the overall sample are provided in Table 1. The qualitative sample ($n = 13$) was equally distributed between assistant professors

Table 1: Description of Study Sample ($N = 109$)	
Characteristic	n (%)
Type of school employed in	
Public	82 (75.2)
Private	27 (24.8)
University size	
< 10,000	11 (10.2)
10,000–20,000	21 (19.4)
> 20,000	76 (70.4)
Number of students in MSW program	
< 200	19 (17.8)
201–400	34 (31.7)
401–600	26 (24.3)
> 600	28 (26.2)
Number of PhD students	
< 20	32 (29.4)
21–40	51 (46.8)
> 40	24 (22.4)
Number of years as assistant professor	
< 1	18 (16.5)
1–2	22 (20.2)
2–3	21 (19.3)
3–4	9 (8.3)
4–5	19 (17.4)
> 5	20 (18.4)
Typical teaching load	
2/2	78 (71.6)
3/2	20 (18.3)
3/3	9 (8.3)
4/4	2 (1.8)
Completion of a postdoc	
Yes	29 (27.1)
No	78 (72.9)
Experience supervising RAs	
Yes	58 (53.2)
No	51 (46.8)
Receive RA support as part of faculty start-up package	
Yes	81 (74.3)
No	28 (25.7)

Note: RA = research assistant.

from private (54%) and public (46%) institutions and schools of different sizes (< 10,000 students = 23%; 10,000 to 20,000 students = 38%; > 20,000 students = 38%). Although this was not representative of the overall group, it enabled us to understand the experiences of professors at different types of institutions. Almost one-third were new assistant professors (31%); the rest had been assistant professors for three or more years. Most had not completed a postdoc (69%), but many had prior experience in supervising RAs prior to becoming assistant professors (62%).

Analysis

Univariate and bivariate analysis of the quantitative survey was conducted using SPSS version 22. Chi-square tests were used to test for significant associations between preparation variables and satisfaction in five different areas. Open-ended responses from the quantitative survey were analyzed by two coders using an open coding approach, then grouped into themes. These themes were subsequently used as sensitizing codes for analyzing the qualitative interviews. A final qualitative codebook was created through an iterative process, with three analysts coding the same five interviews and then meeting to refine the codebook and resolve discrepancies. Coders met to discuss the meanings of the coded data and examine the major themes and dimensions of the results.

RESULTS

Our results provide information about the process of selecting, training, and working with RAs. We present findings for each of our research questions, beginning with quantitative results from the survey, then followed by information from the qualitative interviews. Together, the quantitative and qualitative data provide a picture of the experiences of assistant professors with RAs that suggest points of intervention to improve the experiences of both assistant professors and students.

Tasks Assigned

The survey asked assistant professors to rate how often (regularly, sometimes, or never) they assigned a variety of tasks to RAs. All respondents reported assigning literature searches (100%), with 83% indicating they assign them regularly. Writing for publication (91.3% overall, 35.6% regularly), data entry (86.3% overall, 40.2% regularly), and data collection (85% overall, 34% regularly) were the next most commonly endorsed items. Assistance with teaching was less frequent (43%) than the other tasks, with only 13% of the sample reporting that their RA assisted with teaching regularly. Other tasks identified included attending community meetings, assistance in preparing IRB submissions, cleaning data, formatting manuscripts, translating study materials into another language, creating presentation posters and slides, and transcribing qualitative interviews. Data from the qualitative interviews provided insight into how assistant professors made decisions about the tasks they assigned to their RAs. Some noted that they tried not to give their RA “scut work” (Participant 4 [P4]) but

to give them exposure to a wide variety of research training opportunities. Giving them a variety of tasks was mentioned as a way of socializing the student to the many different kinds of demands that are required in the academy.

Satisfaction with RA Work

Survey respondents were asked to rate their satisfaction with their first RA across five areas: (1) relationship with the student, (2) preparation the student had prior to starting, (3) quality of the work they provided, (4) extent to which the student helped the assistant professor complete work in a timely manner, and (5) the extent to which the student helped the assistant professor get his or her research agenda started (see Table 2). Although the majority of assistant professors were highly satisfied with the relationship they had with their first student (73.1%), only one-third were highly satisfied with the preparation their RAs had when they started (34.3%). Satisfaction was higher with the quality of the work (50.0%), but fewer reported being highly satisfied with the extent to which the RA had helped them launch their research agenda (37.4%). We also examined the relationship between satisfaction on each of these five domains and our preparation variables. Across all five items, we found no significant differences in satisfaction levels between professors who had prior experience in working with RAs and those who did not. Having completed a postdoc was also not related to satisfaction ratings [across five scales, $\chi^2(2, N = 107-108) = 0.38-3.81, p = .83-.15$]. For student preparation, we found significant differences in satisfaction based on the level of the RA's education [across five scales, $\chi^2(2, N = 107-108) = 1.03-2.92, p = .60-.23$]. Across all satisfaction domains, we noted a trend in which those with MSW students and second- and third-year doctoral students had higher satisfaction ratings than those working with first-year doctoral students. These differences were statistically significant for the relationship with the RA [$\chi^2(4, N = 107) = 9.61, p = .047$], the quality of the RA work [$\chi^2(4, N = 108) = 11.61, p = .02$], and the RA level of preparation [$\chi^2(4, N = 108) = 20.27, p < .0001$].

Challenges

We obtained detailed information about the challenges of working with RAs in both phases of the study, asking survey respondents to identify their three greatest challenges and also exploring these in more depth during the qualitative interviews. The identified challenges clustered into five general areas,

Table 2: Satisfaction with Research Assistant's (RA's) Work and Relationship, Overall and by Education Level

Characteristic	Low Satisfaction % (n)	Moderate Satisfaction % (n)	High Satisfaction % (n)	χ^2 (df = 42)
Relationship with RA (n = 107)				
Overall	12.1 (13)	14.0 (15)	73.8 (79)	9.61*
MSW students (n = 46)	13.0 (6)	10.9 (5)	76.1 (35)	
First-year doctoral students (n = 33)	15.2 (5)	27.3 (9)	57.6 (19)	
Second- or third-year doctoral students (n = 28)	7.1 (2)	3.6 (1)	89.3 (25)	
Preparation RA had coming to you (n = 108)				
Overall	23.4 (25)	42.1 (45)	34.6 (37)	20.27****
MSW students (n = 46)	17.4 (8)	34.8 (16)	47.8 (22)	
First-year doctoral students (n = 33)	42.4 (14)	51.5 (17)	6.1 (2)	
Second- or third-year doctoral students (n = 28)	10.7 (3)	42.9 (12)	46.4 (13)	
Quality of RA work (n = 108)				
Overall	20.6 (22)	27.1 (29)	52.3 (56)	11.61*
MSW students (n = 46)	13.0 (6)	26.1 (12)	60.9 (28)	
First-year doctoral students (n = 33)	39.4 (13)	27.3 (9)	33.3 (11)	
Second- or third-year doctoral students (n = 28)	10.7 (3)	28.6 (8)	60.7 (17)	
Extent the RA helped get your work done (n = 108)				
Overall	29.0 (31)	21.5 (23)	49.5 (53)	8.24
MSW students (n = 46)	21.7 (10)	19.6 (9)	58.7 (27)	
First-year doctoral students (n = 33)	45.5 (15)	24.2 (8)	30.3 (10)	
Second- or third-year doctoral students (n = 28)	21.4 (6)	21.4 (6)	57.1 (16)	
Extent the RA helped you get your research agenda started (n = 107)				
Overall	38.7 (41)	23.6 (25)	37.7 (40)	8.23
MSW students (n = 46)	28.3 (13)	26.1 (12)	45.7 (21)	
First-year doctoral students (n = 33)	57.6 (19)	21.2 (7)	21.2 (7)	
Second- or third-year doctoral students (n = 27)	33.3 (9)	22.2 (6)	44.4 (12)	

*p < .05. ****p < .0001.

listed in order of how commonly they were identified in the survey: (1) RA-specific challenges, including knowledge, skills, and commitment; (2) logistics of assigning and supervising tasks; (3) professor-specific challenges, including expectations and skills; (4) administration and structure of RA benefits at the institution; and (5) guidance, relationships, and mentoring. Table 3 presents these themes with the percentage of respondents who identified it as a challenge and a few examples of the content that was coded into each category.

RA-Specific Challenges: Knowledge, Skills, and Commitment. The most frequently mentioned challenge was lack of knowledge, skills, or commitment on the part of the RA (73%). Typical responses included this one: "Beginning doctoral students have few skills related to academic research." Attitudinal factors included responses like "It isn't their project, so they are less driven to get the work done" and "Lack of commitment to the project or subject matter." These challenges were further explained in the qualitative

interviews, with respondents talking about working with RAs who did not possess strong preparation including writing skills, literature searching skills, and statistical training. For example, one respondent noted, "I would say, 'Do a lit review,' and assume she would do it" (P5), but this was too broad and led to nothing getting done. Another noted that "there is a disparity between my expectations of what a literature review is and theirs" (P1). Many talked about the amount of time required to get their RAs started and trained. One respondent explained this as a type of investment:

It is more work in the front end. It takes a lot of time to get to know their skills, abilities, and meet them where they are in the learning process. . . . But the second part of the year, when the students are trained, I can see the benefit of the work. (P7)

Students were also noted to have many competing demands and to be constrained to work for a

Table 3: Greatest Challenges (N = 101)		
Theme	n (%)	Example
RA-specific challenges: knowledge, skills, and commitment	74 (73.2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Beginning doctoral students have few skills related to academic research” • “Lack of commitment to the project or subject matter”
Logistics of managing time and tasks	68 (67.3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Making sure that supervising them does not take longer than if I just did the work myself” • “Taking time from my schedule to meet with them, assign them work, and track their effort”
Professor-specific challenges: skills and expectations	24 (23.7)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Being responsible for someone else. I’m so used to working independently; it’s hard considering another person in my approach to the work.”
Administrative and structural challenges	23 (23.7)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “Recruiting and hiring” • “Securing funding”
Mentorship	10 (9.9)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • “How to broach [that] some RAs need more professional socialization”

limited time as they progress through the graduate program. As one assistant professor noted, sometimes students have just had time to “find their legs” and then they move on (P8).

Logistics of Managing Time and Tasks. The word that appeared most frequently and prominently in the open-ended responses of the survey was “time.” The other challenges identified surely contributed to the issue that was raised over and over again—working with RAs takes a lot of time. Two-thirds (67%) of survey respondents gave responses that fell into this category: “making sure that supervising them does not take longer than if I just did the work myself”; “taking time from my schedule to meet with them, assign them work, and track their effort.” In the interviews this theme was often related specifically to other challenges such as a lack of skills, training, and competence on both sides. The following comment was typical: “If I had all the time in the world, it would be easier” (P10). One respondent, who had just completed her first year as an assistant professor, concluded, “I thought having an RA would be a help, but it was way more time consuming” (P5).

Professor-Specific Challenges: Skills and Expectations. Many professors (24%) also talked about their

own lack of knowledge and skills in delegating work and managing their students. One person reported, “I have little training and experience managing RAs.” Another noted that it was difficult “being responsible for someone else. I’m so used to working independently; it’s hard considering another person in my approach to the work.” Participants in the qualitative interviews talked about their own learning curves in respect to managing students. One of the central features was learning how to delegate tasks to students after being a doctoral student, when you were expected to do everything yourself. One respondent noted that “it is overwhelming to think—what do I have to have this person do for 10 hours a week” (P2).

Administrative and Structural Challenges. The work of RAs and professors occurs within a broader context, which was noted to present challenges by 24% of respondents. These challenges included the way that students are recruited and funded, how students are trained by the program, and how students were assigned to work with faculty. The structure of student funding emerged as a factor in setting the stage for the individual RA–assistant professor relationship, particularly for work with doctoral students. Respondents described a range of funding packages for their doctoral students, from four years fully funded to no guaranteed funding at all. Those at schools where students were funded less generously noted that they had trouble attracting research-oriented students, and it was observed by one assistant professor that the pool of RAs was “not fully funded, [they] don’t have enough time and don’t have the passion for research and research careers” (P5). The opposite is true in other cases, when students are so generously funded that they are not available or motivated to take on RA duties.

Respondents also noted challenges of funding that limited students to working for a few hours per week, required them to share student time across several professors, or limited the time RAs worked with one professor in a semester or a year. One respondent noted that she has moved away from working with RAs because as soon as she gets them trained they move on, and another noted that the ideal time needed to build a relationship with an RA is two years.

Another dynamic that affects the RA–assistant professor relationship is the way students are assigned or selected for RA positions. Across the sample, 45% of respondents reported that their RA is assigned to them, 31% selects from a pool of students, and 24%

used both or some other means of finding their RA. The process of assignment was generally linked to how the students were funded by the program. Some programs tied funding to doctoral students and allowed the students to approach professors they were interested in working with. These relationships were usually based on mutual interest and placed the faculty member in an advisory capacity from the start. In these situations, while the student provided labor on projects, the basis of the relationship began with the student's interests and needs. A more common approach tied funding to the assistant professor either through grants, faculty start-up packages, or competitive department resources. Then the professor was either assigned a student or allowed to recruit, interview, and select. These relationships were inherently based on the assistant professor's need for assistance with research and varied in the level of fit. In these situations, the task and role for the RA was more carefully delineated from the start, and although a match in interests was desirable, the criteria used to select the student was focused on having the student accomplish particular tasks. This contributed to challenges, with assistant professors reporting a poor fit with the student in interests or work styles. When there was a match, assistant professors noted that students were more invested and took on a more independent role.

Mentorship. Several respondents spoke at length about mentorship and framed this as a central component of their work with students, with both costs and benefits. Some survey respondents (10%) identified mentoring as one of their greatest challenges, and this concern emerged prominently in the qualitative interviews as respondents discussed their philosophies about working with RAs. Some noted that developing and supporting students requires a substantial amount of time that “nobody budgets or credits for” (P2). One assistant professor talked about working with students who are overwhelmed by the amount of work they encounter in the doctoral program and supporting them, noting, “This is part of our job but we’re not told that that’s what we’re going to do” (P2). Some stressed that the time spent in mentoring students eventually pays dividends either in publications, with the assistant professor serving as a secondary author, or in improved performance in their RA’s work. One noted the strength of taking a mentoring approach: “I want it done the way I want it done, so there is a benefit to me to teach them” (P3). Some assistant professors

spoke about viewing their role in working with students as primarily that of mentorship. One described this mentoring approach as conveying to the student that “I’m a human being—I see you and who you are—on both an academic and person level” (P4). Another noted, “I have seen two approaches to working with students—being an employer and being a mentor” (P3), and these are very different approaches. Several respondents stated that their own skills and desire to be a mentor came from their experiences of receiving mentorship. As one respondent put it, “Because of what I got, I know what to do” (P2).

Discussions of Authorship. Almost all interview respondents talked about trying to ensure that students received authorship as part of their work, but the extent to which this was a focus varied across the sample. One respondent had not included the student as coauthor at all and explained that this was because she had not yet “gotten an area where they offer significant contribution as coauthors” (P10). In contrast, other respondents expected to be publishing with students: “It is just a given” (P12). For many, the distinction between work and authorship was related to student initiative and independent thought. For example, one assistant professor stated that if a student helped with data analysis and participated in the conceptual and developmental process of writing and analysis, she consider them a coauthor (P3). Another respondent described her rules for authorship, which she discusses with students in the beginning of the working relationship. The question that she asks is, “What is the individual’s contribution to the publication?” (P7). Some stated that writing sections of the manuscript was their criterion, and this was true regardless of whether this work was an assigned task for their paid RA duties: “If they are writing a portion of the manuscript, whether they are paid or not, they should have some authorship” (P13). Assistant professors generally made distinctions between being a coauthor and the first author. For the student to be the first author, they needed to have the idea for the paper and take the initiative to write and drive it forward. One respondent noted that prior to starting on the tenure clock she had viewed first authorship differently, but “it’s tricky when you become a new professor and you need publications for tenure” (P4). Others noted that it is beneficial for them if their students are seen to be publishing and to have papers led by students where they were listed as coauthors.

Lessons Learned and Strategies for Success

In addition to understanding challenges, we were also interested in learning how respondents had overcome their challenges. Survey participants responded to an open-ended question about the lessons they had learned to be successful in working with RAs. These responses, clustered into five themes, are identified and discussed in the following subsections. Frequencies and example quotes are provided in Table 4. These themes were also clear in our qualitative interviews, where we gained more nuanced information about each of these areas.

Set Clear Expectations and Follow Up Regularly. Many assistant professors talked about the need to clearly convey what they expected in the work they assigned their students, then to follow up regularly (72%). A strategy emphasized by many was to set regular scheduled working meetings that both parties signed off on and attended. As observed by one assistant professor, “It takes a lot of time to get RAs

at a place where they can make a contribution.” Scheduled time was described as facilitating realistic goals, helping to manage expectations, and providing a space to make needed adjustments for moving forward. Through this process, assistant professors noted that it is important to ask for results along the way and not to wait to the end to see the final product. Giving deadlines was deemed important, and some stressed the need to focus on products rather than hours worked. “It is about the product . . . I don’t think about how long it’s going to take them. I just need it done” (P5).

Use Specific Tools to Make Life Easier. Throughout the interviews, respondents talked about specific tools they used to work with RAs. One described writing up a formal memorandum of understanding to detail tasks and products that were anticipated out of the relationship. Another noted that she uses a checklist to assess RA skills and interests. In doing this, she both clarified expectations and learned more about how to make opportunities available to match student interests. Participants mentioned keeping a running list of tasks in a central location such as Dropbox and having the student document the completion of these tasks. Another suggestion was to use time logs to track not only what had been accomplished, but also the amount of time spent on each task. This helps to identify areas in which the RA might be struggling (such as spending three hours on a literature review instead of one hour) and could be a helpful tool to use in supervision. Communication strategies were also suggested, such as having the student document what was discussed during meetings and report back in an e-mail to demonstrate clarity, “like back translation” (P7).

Value Student Needs and Learning. Another set of strategies focused on privileging student needs and learning as part of the RA relationship (31%). Participants in the interviews spoke at length about the importance of supporting students, being flexible with them, and adopting an attitude of mentorship and teaching. As one assistant professor observed, it means treating them “as though they were me . . . [it] gives them the confidence required to do the work” (P5). Respecting and treating RAs in ways that build “a collegial relationship” (P12) involves giving RAs meaningful activities and creating opportunities for them, such as the chance to present at academic conferences. In addition, participants stressed the need to treat RAs as people and show appreciation for their schedules and the work they do. Flexibility was

Table 4: Lessons Learned (N = 90)		
Theme	n (%)	Example
Set clear expectations and follow up regularly	65 (72.2)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Prepare in advance for meetings with clear objectives and tasks”• “Conduct regular supervision meetings”
Use specific tools to make life easier	51 (56.7)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Weekly updates and a system for tracking tasks were helpful”
Value student needs and learning	39 (43.3)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Help to understand what they also want to get out of the work—such as publications, mentorship, and so on. RAs are more motivated when the relationship is mutually beneficial (beyond the low salary) and when their input and opinions as a colleague are valued”
Select RAs carefully	19 (21.1)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Recruit strong students and be clear at the outset about the student’s current abilities and potential for growth”
Scale back expectations	17 (18.9)	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• “Be prepared to redo some or all of their work”• “One must manage them like any other entry-level employee”

Note: RA = research assistant.

an important component of this approach. One assistant professor noted, “Whereas other professors would prefer someone with prior skills and experience, I am flexible enough to adjust to where they are. . . . I work with them from there” (P10). Flexibility also demands the wisdom to know when to be accommodating, to adjust to the needs of a student, and to show empathy.

Select RAs Carefully. Many assistant professors talked about the importance of selecting good students to be successful (21%). When possible, they preferred to work with students they had seen perform in some way, often as a student in their classes. The qualities they looked for included the ability to “conceptualize broader ideas, strong theoretical understanding, hardworking, has a passion for learning, and . . . the stamina and perseverance it takes to be successful in this work” (P4). Other participants noted the importance of strong writing skills and ensuring that the student’s schedule would allow him or her to put in the time required to complete the tasks.

Scale Back Expectations. A final strategy discussed by many (16%) was to adjust the expectations they had of their RA. Comments included statements like the following: “I learned to not assume that my RA knew certain things. Since she was a first-year student in the PhD program who started directly from her undergraduate studies, she needed some more guidance and direction regarding research” (P5). Assistant professors noted that the nature of work in the academy is such that “everything takes longer than you think it’s going to” (P1), and it helps to set reasonable expectations. Assessing student skills laid the groundwork for this, and assistant professors described several approaches. One was to start small and “assign one task at a time,” tasks that build on one another (P4). Starting with small tasks was a strategy used by some as a “sort of assessment to see where they take it” (P5). Once assistant professors understood student skills, they were able to match the tasks assigned to the strengths their students displayed. Another strategy was to “get them moving right away” (P3), so that you can see their work and what they can do. Others simply scaled back their expectations. For example, “instead of having them do a literature review, I ask them to do an annotated bibliography” (P1).

Advantages

Whereas we did not ask specifically about the advantages of working with students in the quantitative

survey, we did ask about advantages in our qualitative interviews. Respondents described several ways in which RAs improved both the quality and quantity of the work they produced. Several noted that RAs bring their own perspectives, which are helpful in deepening the work: “They have different ideas—they think about things that I don’t” (P4). This was noted particularly in reference to students who were younger, came from a discipline other than social work, or had clinical experience they brought to the work. Second, RAs helped with writing and could increase the number of papers that got out the door. RAs took on tasks that freed the assistant professor to work on publications. As one noted, “If you have someone you trust, they can help with things I don’t have time to do well, like making posters” (P5). Third, students played a role in increasing productivity by sustaining the momentum of projects or papers and providing “another form of accountability” that helped keep the projects “moving forward” (P10).

DISCUSSION

This study provides new information about a topic that has been neglected in the social work literature—the supervision, management, and mentoring of RAs. We focused specifically on the experiences of assistant professors because assistant professors are often provided with RA time as part of faculty start-up packages, and many have little experience in managing this resource. Our findings revealed that assistant professors from social work schools across the country expressed similar frustrations and concerns—most prominently the time-intensive nature of the relationship and the lack of preparation both they and their students received. Our respondents shared a variety of strategies that can assist future generations of assistant professors to more effectively manage and support RAs. In addition, findings provide guidance for programs seeking to better prepare students and assistant professors to work together. We discuss our findings in relation to each of these groups, first discussing implications for assistant professors, then for administrators of social work programs.

A few findings stood out that suggest strategies for assistant professors to establish strong working relationships with RAs that lead to greater research productivity. Several of our themes reflected the need to start the relationship out right. This included selecting a student who would be a good fit (if possible) and assessing skills at the start of the relationship. We recommend that assistant professors devote

time at the start of the relationship to purposefully assess RA skills and interests, and then assign tasks with these factors in mind. In addition, clear communication about work expectations, paired with strategies to follow up and track task completion, was identified by many as key to success. Devoting time early in the relationship to setting up mechanisms for clear communication and feedback are likely to yield dividends later. In addition, structuring time for training and feedback on a regular basis is likely to save time spent following up on work that is not completed or not completed to standards.

Although these strategies seem clear to many assistant professors in retrospect, they came out of a trial-and-error process for most. Only one of our respondents had received any structured training on supervising students, and most had not devoted much thought to the dynamics of working with students beyond the benefit they perceived for their work. Social work programs should consider providing basic training on supervising RAs for assistant professors when they join the faculty and for advanced doctoral students entering the job market. This training could help to shape expectations and provide basic management skills to prepare the RA–assistant professor relationship for success. In addition, it may be important to change the conversation about research assistantships when start-up packages are negotiated. Although RAs have the potential to improve faculty productivity, there is also a time investment required upfront that should be considered. Delaying this benefit to start in the second semester of employment or pairing new faculty with more advanced doctoral students with greater skills in their first semester may ease the transition. Rather than presenting RA support as an unconditional benefit, it may be better to discuss the topic with more nuance.

Another important aspect of working with students as RAs is mentorship. Research on mentorship has identified two general domains involved in the mentoring relationship: (1) career functions such as sponsorship and coaching, and (2) psychosocial functions such as counseling and friendship (Kram, 1988). We saw evidence in our data of assistant professors serving both of these functions; however, in most cases the relationships were not structured explicitly as mentoring relationships but, instead, as working relationships. Moak and Walker (2014) identified 10 essential elements for mentoring success that are somewhat similar to the strategies for success

suggested by the assistant professors in this study: (1) make sure you have time, (2) listen to the student, (3) respect the student, (4) engage the student, (5) challenge the student, (6) develop the student's skills, (7) give the student credit, (8) introduce the student to others in the field, (9) make time for social activities outside academia, and (10) be involved in the student's life. Moak and Walker explicitly stated, however, that there is a distinction between the mentor and the person a student works for, noting that the role of mentor is distinct and student-focused. In addition, they noted that those who are just out of graduate school may not be the best mentors because they may have unrealistically high expectations or align too closely with students (Moak & Walker, 2014). Furthermore, it seems that the student focus conveyed in the mentoring paradigm may be difficult to manage for assistant professors who are adjusting to a new environment while meeting the productivity demands required for tenure. Understanding how to support students, even if the role is not established as one of formal mentorship, was found to be an integral aspect of working with RAs in our study. As noted in prior literature, there is often limited formal training or structure for mentorship (Lei & Chuang, 2009; Moak & Walker, 2014), and this may be an important area for future training and integration into programs to help assistant professors prepare to work effectively with RAs.

Our findings also have implications for social work doctoral programs. Our data showed that assistant professors were often dissatisfied with the minimal research skills of their RAs, particularly those of first-year doctoral students. One avenue for improving satisfaction in this area may be more systematic training of new RAs for their role. Most of our respondents (89%) reported that there was no formal training at their institutions for RAs. Social work programs might improve the readiness of their students for RA work by ensuring that all students receive training on searching, reviewing, and synthesizing the literature, perhaps through campus library resources. Other common tasks involved working with data; therefore, training on the basic functionality of programs like SPSS could also be worthwhile. At present, it appears that many programs do not focus on preparing their students to be effective RAs, so some guidance to coordinate training may go a long way toward improving student skills and the satisfaction of both students and assistant professors with their ability to perform beginning research tasks.

Somewhat surprising was the finding that assistant professors were more satisfied with MSW students than first-year doctoral students. We believe that this may be the result of several different factors. It is likely that the expectations of assistant professors for their doctoral students are higher than that of their master's students, and hence they may assign more complicated or sophisticated tasks to doctoral students and be less satisfied with the results. New assistant professors sometimes judge their students on the basis of their own skill level, forgetting where they started at the beginning of their doctoral programs (Moak & Walker, 2014). In addition, MSW students who intentionally pursue RA opportunities are usually interested in learning more about research but have less concern for the specific tasks they are doing or whether the research area is a fit with their interests. In contrast, first-year doctoral students have an expectation of getting some specific training out of the relationship and a specific area of interest, adding a layer of complication not present with MSW students. Finally, the first semester of a doctoral program is a notably stressful time for many, and students may be overwhelmed by course expectations that are significantly higher than in previous educational experiences, contributing to challenges in managing the work they are doing for their research assistantship.

Funding structures across universities vary widely, but our findings suggest that there are some conditions to strive for that may improve the quality of relationships between RAs and assistant professors. Universities where doctoral students were more generously funded had students who were more available to devote time and focus to research assistantships, and the students themselves were more interested in research careers. When possible, allowing students and faculty to have some input into the RA matching process was also desirable, especially if there were similar research interests. Given the time investment needed to assess and train students, structures that enabled faculty and students to work together for several years were ideal. Finally, in light of the specific challenges noted with first-year doctoral students, programs may want to consider waiting to have students begin RA work until their second semester or to provide additional support for both the faculty and students during the initial semester.

Another tension that emerged in our study involved lack of a clear vision of the purpose of the research assistantship. Although departments often present research assistantships as a benefit to enhance

research productivity for faculty, they are generally presented to students as a way to enhance their learning and provide financial support. These differing expectations may contribute to some of the frustrations expressed by assistant professors, who often did not have training and support to be good mentors and teachers, especially as they were learning to be independent researchers and to establish themselves as productive scholars. Discussion of the needs on both sides, at the start of the relationship, might help both students and assistant professors better understand how to work together for a mutually beneficial relationship.

Our study contains some limitations that are important to note. The response rate of 36% means that the survey cannot be considered representative of all assistant professors at GADE schools nationwide. It is likely that those who are most interested in this topic or those who had the most negative or positive experiences were more apt to respond. In addition, the primary investigators of the study are three assistant professors, a doctoral student, and a director of a doctoral program, so we had our own perspectives and experiences that shaped the questions we asked on the survey and our interpretation of the results. We attempted to counter these by seeking feedback from more senior colleagues and clearly articulating our own biases.

In spite of these limitations, this study provides information from a national survey of social work assistant professors about a topic that has not been discussed in the social work literature. Our work suggests that there are some relatively simple steps that both assistant professors and social work programs can take to improve working relationships with RAs that may lead to better support for students, more efficient use of RA time, and better support for faculty productivity. **SWR**

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Original manuscript received February 6, 2015
Final revision received April 12, 2015
Accepted April 29, 2015
Advance Access Publication December 27, 2015

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CODE: APRH15