Scholars, Educators, Leaders

Upcoming Graduates
PhD in Social Work
2018-2019
Dear Colleagues,

It is my pleasure to introduce you to the upcoming graduates of the PhD Program at the University of Tennessee College of Social Work.

Our students are trained in rigorous research methods and innovative pedagogy. They are eager and ready to serve as the newest scholars, educators, and emerging leaders in our profession.

At the University of Tennessee, we are proud of our scholarship grounded in community needs, with an eye to social impact and societal change. Our students’ research interests reflect these values and—as their biographies and curriculum vitae attest—include a deep commitment to improving the quality of life for the most vulnerable groups in society.

It would be my pleasure to connect you with any of our upcoming graduates or to provide you with additional information. Please contact me at (865) 974-3802 or mason@utk.edu.

With best regards,

Lisa Reyes Mason, PhD, MSW
PhD Program Director
University of Tennessee College of Social Work
Omotola Akinsola

oakinsol@utk.edu | http://tiny.utk.edu/akinsola

“The social work profession is the vehicle for research to create and design programs and systems that work for the greater and common good of society.”

Omotola Akinsola is passionate about education, youth, leadership, community service, and social entrepreneurship. In Nigeria, she founded JumpStart Academy, a nonprofit organization that works with youth to develop them into agents of positive change. Her research interests aim to address educational and economic disparities, advance youth development, and create new social entrepreneurship and leadership opportunities in developing countries. She also has interests in nonprofit management and fundraising.

Akinsola has worked with and consulted for several nonprofit organizations. She is also regularly called upon to speak to youth on topics such as leadership, social entrepreneurship, and community development. She has an MSW from the Brown School of Social Work at Washington University in St. Louis and a BSW from Columbia College.

Kaycee Bills, LMSW

kbills1@vols.utk.edu | http://tiny.utk.edu/bills

“Being a change agent starts with creating good social workers. As a scholar, I hope to influence future social workers the way that my professors influenced me.”

Kaycee Bills’ research focus is inclusive social work practice for individuals who have developmental disabilities. Her dissertation examines the relationship between extracurricular activity involvements and bullying victimization when using disability as a moderator.

Bills earned her MSW from Hawaii Pacific University where she worked as a research assistant for a NIDA funded study examining the social and cultural context of substance abuse for indigenous populations. Prior to pursuing her PhD, Bills helped create a special needs cheerleading squad called the Whitley County Dazzlers. The squad has over 30 members across the U.S. who compete and perform at events. Bills also has professional experience providing social work services to clients with disabilities, working in community mental health, and serving in the United States Navy Reserves.
Jennifer Erwin
jerwin6@vols.utk.edu | http://tiny.utk.edu/erwin

“Social work is such a fulfilling profession. I pursued a PhD to help prepare new social workers and to have a broader impact on policy issues that affect the profession.”

Jennifer Erwin’s research focuses on adults with mental illness and the criminal justice system. Her dissertation examines individual- and court-level factors of mental health court completion. Erwin’s research is informed by her practice experience as a Recovery Support Specialist on an Assertive Community Treatment team at a behavioral health nonprofit in Washington, D.C. Jennifer graduated from law school before beginning her career as a social worker; she also completed a minor in statistics while at the University of Tennessee.

Erwin has taught several courses independently, at both the Master’s and Bachelor’s level, and in face-to-face and online formats. She incorporates her research and practice experience into her teaching to provide students with real world examples, and she emphasizes the importance of lifelong critical thinking.

Joseph Strong
jstrong5@vols.utk.edu | http://tiny.utk.edu/jstrong

“To understand the brain is to understand the entirety of the human experience.”

Joe Strong’s research focuses on Alzheimer’s Disease in pre-, during, and post-Great Depression birth cohorts, Charles Bonnet Syndrome, and equivalence testing in social work research.

For his dissertation, he recruited older adults with dementia from a local community center to test the effects of exposure to natural scenery via immersive virtual reality on mood and navigational ability.

Strong was selected for the 2016 Association for Gerontology in Social Work Education Pre-Dissertation Fellowship. Neuroscience in social work education, research, and practice has been the primary subject of his publications and conference presentations. He also has four years post-MSSW practice experience in medical social work. Strong has a BS in Molecular Biology and Microbiology from the University of Central Florida and a MSSW and statistics minor from the University of Tennessee.
Sukyung Yoon
syoon11@vols.utk.edu | http://tiny.utk.edu/yoon

“My overarching professional goal is to empower vulnerable older populations who may not speak for themselves, so that they may overcome adversity and enjoy happier and healthier lives.”

Sukyung Yoon’s research focuses on the public health dimensions of gerontological mental and physical health both in the U.S. and South Korea. She is interested in identifying pathways that reduce or prevent the accumulative and negative impact of adversity over the lifespan.

Her dissertation examines protective factors against suicidal ideation among community-dwelling older adults who have experienced spousal or partner physical abuse, with a focus on mediating and moderating effects.

Before beginning her PhD, Yoon served as a licensed social worker in Seoul, South Korea, for 10 years. As part of her PhD program, she completed a minor in statistics. Yoon also currently teaches in both the online MSW program and the face-to-face BSW program at the University of Tennessee.