Scholars, Educators, Leaders
PhD in Social Work

Upcoming Graduates
2020-2021
Fall 2020

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 geely@utk.edu

With warm regards,

Gretchen E. Ely, PhD, MSW
Professor, PhD Program Director
University of Tennessee
College of Social Work
1618 Cumberland Ave.
Knoxville, TN 37996
Research Interests:
- Psychotic disorders
- Psychosocial functioning
- Prediction of outcome and recovery in psychosis
- Nosology and longitudinal assessment

Kristan Armstrong's research focuses on investigating the clinical, cognitive, and neural changes during the early stages of psychosis with a particular interest in predicting longitudinal outcomes. Armstrong's dissertation will focus on understanding how pre-illness functioning may provide a better understanding of post-diagnosis psychosocial functioning in the early stages of psychosis. The goal of this line of research is to promote recovery from psychosis by providing more targeted early intervention services. Armstrong has worked on many NIMH funded research projects resulting in roughly 20 publications and numerous conference presentations.

Armstrong has taught several Master's level courses independently, both in-person and online. Armstrong's teaching is informed by over a decade of clinical practice experience in both inpatient and outpatient psychiatric settings. This includes work on a coordinated specialty care team for early psychosis patients and work as the program coordinator of the Vanderbilt University Medical Center’s Psychotic Disorders Program.
Aaron Brown
AaronBrown@utk.edu

Aaron Brown’s research focuses on evidence-based practices for addictions, harm reduction, and rural social work. Brown enjoys leveraging technology and employing advanced quantitative methods in his research including confirmatory factor analysis, structural equation modeling, and hierarchical linear modeling.

For his dissertation, Brown developed an online training and text-messaging intervention designed to change attitudes towards opioid agonist and antagonist treatments among clinicians.

Brown has taught several courses independently, at both the Master’s and Bachelor’s level, and in face-to-face and online formats. His students appreciate how he uses his own practice and research experience to provide them with real world examples. Brown worked in community mental health for over a decade in a variety of roles. Most recently, he worked as an outpatient therapist in rural areas of East Tennessee. Brown’s experiences treating addictions motivated him to pursue research on how to improve access to and utilization of evidence-based practices for addictions in rural communities.

Research Interests:
- Addictions
- Harm Reduction
- Rural Social Work

“Any change that reduces drug-related harm is progress. Harm reduction is about empowering clients to be safer and healthier so they can rebuild their lives.”
Shannon Cain
Scain7@vols.utk.edu

Shannon Cain is passionate about trauma-informed and trauma-sensitive care for children and adults. Her research focuses on prevention of trauma and increasing support and interventions to bring healing to children and adults who have previously experienced trauma.

Her dissertation focuses on mothers who have opioid use disorders and the degree to which these mothers experience trauma-informed care in medical settings. She is examining both reports of certain topics being discussed in prenatal and postpartum care by mothers taking opiates during pregnancy, and providers’ experiences of providing trauma-informed care in a medical setting that serves mother-infant dyads impacted by opioid use disorders.

She earned her MSW from Indiana University at the IUPUI campus. She has a BA with a double major in Psychology and Management from Hope College in Holland, Michigan. Cain has seven years of post-master’s direct practice experience working in inpatient and outpatient behavioral healthcare settings. She is a LCSW in Virginia and Tennessee. While at the University of Tennessee College of Social Work, Cain has had the opportunity to teach independently for the Knoxville Master’s program. Cain uses a variety of learning approaches to accommodate diverse learning needs.

“*My driving goal is to help clients by equipping the next generation of passionate, empathic, competent, and ethical social workers who will change the world one day at time.*”

Research Interests
- Trauma
- Addictions
- Health Care
- Child Welfare
Joe Strong is a gerontological social worker whose research focuses on mental health of older adults as well as aging-related neurological conditions, with a particular interest in dementia. He has four peer-reviewed publications and is currently involved in several research projects related to older adults’ mental health, including one international endeavor. In response to COVID-19 preventing his original dissertation research from proceeding, Strong developed a smartphone-based intervention to study the mental health effects of viewing interactive videos of natural scenery in a statewide sample of older adults.

Strong has a BS in Molecular Biology and Microbiology from the University of Central Florida and a MSSW from the University of Tennessee. He has six years post-MSSW practice experience in medical social work and was selected for the 2016 Association for Gerontology in Social Work Education Pre-Dissertation Fellowship. Additionally, Strong has taught independently at both the Master’s and Bachelor’s level since 2017, gaining experience in both face-to-face and online formats. He brings a creative and interdisciplinary perspective to all aspects of his work, informed by his undergraduate education and the collaborative nature of his medical social work career.
For questions, please contact

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