

The School of Social Service Administration has been a leader in social work for a century, with a **special relationship to the communities and people of Chicago**

Direct



University of Chicago/
Mary McDowell Settlement House

born from the ideals for change of the Progressive Era, the School of Social Service Administration has been an advocate and resource for

Chicagoans in need for 100 years. SSA has a history of impact on the issues that are central to the lives of the city's citizens, families, and neighborhoods: Poverty. Education. Family support. Mental illness. Crime. Urban development. Health care. Housing. Substance abuse. Child welfare. Employment. That legacy continues today.

"SSA is a unique institution. As you would expect from a school at the University of Chicago, the research and academics are as rigorous as any graduate school in the country. At SSA, all that intellectual energy—the research, the teaching, the service—is purpose-driven, though, to be a resource for improving the social welfare of individuals and communities," says Jeanne C. Marsh, SSA's Dean and George Herbert Jones Distinguished Service Professor. "And all this is occurring in Chicago, a great American city that allows us to serve and learn in our own backyard."

SSA's effect can be seen in the intervention models and theories from its faculty that have become state-of-the-art for practitioners in the field, and from the direct advice and insight faculty and

staff provide to the city's civic and nonprofit institutions. It certainly is felt by the organizations that work closely with SSA's students and those that are served or run by the School's graduates.

"Children's Memorial Hospital has had social workers here for almost a hundred years, and the history of our department and the history of SSA are very closely tied together. SSA has always had a strong impact on Children's, and I think over the years we have shaped each other," says Chris Haen, the manager of social work at Children's Memorial Hospital and an SSA graduate. "SSA has always been at the forefront of social work research, making certain that they're teaching not only what has been learned in the past, but creating the next generation of social work and improving the practice."

SSA has been, according to social work historian Patrick Selmi, a leading school in the field for a solid century. Selmi, associate professor at the School of Social Work at the University of Windsor in Ontario, Canada, and an SSA graduate, points to the School's "tremendous impact" on child welfare, gang violence, social policy, community organization, and social work theory as examples of its strengths. "SSA's extraordinary breadth and depth, as well its strong cross-disciplinary foundation," he says, "have set it apart from most other schools of social work throughout its history."

SSA Is Built for Change

From the beginning, SSA was a Chicago institution, designed to make a difference in people's lives.

BY CARL VOGEL

Additional research by Samuel Barrett, Anne Bostrum, Carol Coohy, Ed Finkel, Julie Jung, Sheridan Lardner, Chris Leiker, and Emily Stolarick



Impact



Founding mothers (left to right): Grace Abbott, Sophonisba Breckinridge with Marian Talbot, Edith Abbott, Julia Lathrop

Much of the early curriculum at the School pushed forward ideas of what social work could accomplish.



Reverend Graham Taylor

Reverend Graham Taylor, one of the leaders of the city’s turn of the century reform movement and the director of the Chicago Commons Settlement House, opened the Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy in 1908 as part of his ongoing mission to provide training to the pioneers in the practice of providing aid in the city’s poorest neighborhoods, particularly to the most vulnerable residents.

Key faculty members at the Chicago School included Sophonisba Breckinridge, Edith Abbott, and Julia Lathrop. Together, these women and several others would become known as the “founding mothers” of the School when it changed its name to the School of Social Service Administration in 1920 and became a professional graduate school of the University of Chicago.

In particular, Breckinridge, the head of the School’s research department, and Abbott, SSA’s first dean, had an enormous effect on the direction of the School and Chicago. Abbott had a Ph.D. in economics from the University of Chicago, and Breckinridge was the first woman to receive a doctoral degree in political science from the University, going on to get a law degree as well. Like Taylor, they were also deeply embedded in the city’s settlement house movement—Breckinridge, Edith Abbott, and her sister Grace lived for a number of years at Jane Addams’ famous Hull House on the West Side.

“The Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy was among the earliest schools of social work, founded during the first decade of the 20th century,” says Paul Stuart, professor and director at the Florida International University School of Social Work, who is working on a book on SSA’s intellectual history. “Unlike the other early schools, though, settlement house people, not charity

organizers or child savers, founded the Chicago School. The settlements, especially in Chicago, focused on achieving changes in the environment, not only on individual change.”

A mix of academic rigor and demand for improving conditions in the city was the motivating impetus at SSA from the start. For example, Addams credited Abbott and Breckinridge’s social investigations for the “best results” from Hull House, and the pair were at the forefront of those advocating for fair treatment of African Americans in Chicago, participating in many civic committees on the issue and conducting research to advance the cause. Grace Abbott, who taught at the School before and after serving as the head of the U.S. Children’s Bureau for more than a decade, pioneered the process of collecting and incorporating sociological data to support policy decisions around issues such as child labor and juvenile delinquency.

Much of the early curriculum at the School pushed forward ideas of what social work could accomplish—for instance, its course for playground supervisors, the first in the nation, attracted participants from around the country. SSA was a leader in academic innovations in the field, including psychiatric courses, case-method coursework, and an interdisciplinary approach that provided students with a wide range of perspectives. All in the service of making a difference.

“Abbott and Breckinridge sought to create a new setting within the university that would permit them to address public issues and advance social research. In so doing, they helped professionalize social work,” writes Ellen Fitzpatrick in her book *Endless Crusade: Women Social Scientists and*

Progressive Reform. “From the start, [they] drew inspiration for their intellectual and political work from the city of Chicago. Their scholarship and social activism were deeply influenced by the urban, industrial setting in which they lived.”

Many Factors, One Goal

During the first quarter century of SSA’s existence, the influence and mission of Taylor, Abbott, Breckinridge, and their counterparts laid an indelible stamp on the School. In the decades since, the School of Social Service Administration has maintained its commitment to harnessing the intellectual power of its faculty and students in the service of social change and improving the lives of the disenfranchised.

It can be difficult to tease out the exact source of SSA’s impact, because its influence is intertwined between social science research, consultation of the faculty and staff, day-to-day work of the students and graduates, and the interplay between these factors. Melissa Roderick, SSA’s Hermon Dunlap Smith Professor and a fixture in the school reform movement in Chicago and nationally, argues that SSA’s longstanding position in Chicago provides the feedback to be more effective.

“At SSA, we crunch the numbers and do the research, we train the people, and we have interaction with the people creating policies—and that combination is what makes SSA so different,” Roderick says. “We have long-term connections with people who run the agencies, people who are out there doing the work every day. In a lot of cases, those people are graduates. That type of connection, then, is invaluable for research and to know what’s going on in the communities.”

The best way to understand just how SSA has impacted Chicago over the last century is to stop and consider each factor in turn—the scholarship, the expertise, the students, and the alumni. The people and projects that illustrate SSA’s influence come from every decade, and for every example of an advance authored by the School’s current and past faculty or a noteworthy alumni, many more exist.

“To me, a central and defining feature of SSA is its remarkable consistency,” Selmi says. “When it opened, it was at the forefront of social work

education, and it has stayed at the forefront ever since.”

Research and Scholarship

Part of the legacy of the founding mothers is what could be called effective research. During their time at the School, Sophonisba Breckinridge and Edith Abbott produced groundbreaking reports on issues in Chicago ranging from working women to substandard housing, often at the request of local institutions looking for research to explain local conditions and measure their policies. Ceding nothing in balance and scientific rigor—in fact, SSA in many ways set the bar for research at a school of social work—the reports of Abbott, Breckinridge, and their peers were explicitly designed to provide the information needed to improve the lives of the city’s poor.

Over the years, producing research that is relevant, useful, and accessible has been a hallmark of SSA. Associate Professor Robert Chaskin recently co-edited a book, *Research for Action: Cross-National Perspectives on Connecting Knowledge, Policy, and Practice for Children*, that lays out how social science can and should affect policy. “Investigators have increasingly recognized and begun to map out the complexity of the processes that mediate the relationship between knowledge development and knowledge utilization,” he writes.

Research from SSA during the last century has been used countless times by the institutions that shape Chicago’s communities and by the practitioners who work with the city’s disadvantaged residents every day. With their scholarship, faculty at SSA have helped shape the state’s juvenile court and foster care systems, and their models have been adopted to stop gang violence and provide counseling to those suffering from mental illness.

“SSA is a very dynamic place. The way in



Sophonisba Breckinridge

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PATRICK SELMI

which scholars come here and move forward their research agenda is really kind of amazing,” says Waldo E. Johnson, Jr., an associate professor at SSA. “Being here in Chicago is wonderful because of the rich conditions of community-based research that are possible. You have connections to the practitioners at the ground level over the years.”

SSA’s impact is no accident, however. While it certainly is the case that premier graduate schools produce ground-breaking research, few are as committed to seeing the work make a difference. “One of the things I try to take into account as I think about an issue I want to explore is how relevant is it to the world today. At SSA, you can be engaged at the level where you’re doing serious thinking theoretically and conceptually, analyzing case studies, whether quantitatively or qualitatively. But you can also benefit from the opportunity to interact with problems as they’re evolving and manifesting themselves in the lives of people,” Johnson says.



Bernece Simon

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Direct Involvement

Johnson, an expert on the physical and psychosocial health statuses of African-American males and their families, is also an example of how SSA faculty serve as a direct resource to those working in the field or creating policy. He is or has been involved as a consultant for a wide variety of programs, including the Illinois Department of Children and Family Services, the Chicago Community Trust, Manpower Development Research Corp., and the United Way of Metropolitan Chicago.

The link between SSA faculty and Chicago’s civic and policy institutions stretches back to the school’s start and provides a window into the broad range of issues with which it is involved. Samuel Deutsch Professor Emerita Bernece Simon supervised the field unit at the Michael Reese Hospital in the 1940s, for example, and over the last several decades, Professor Emerita Pastora San Juan Cafferty led graduate students in research and to develop solutions addressing racial, ethnic and community relations for the Ford Foundation, the Cook County board, local corporations, and the Chicago Project, a program in the 1980s that provided in-depth research on the civic life in the city.

“For a big part of my career, I’ve had the opportunity to be out in the community,” says Stan McCracken, a senior lecturer at SSA who has

advised state and local agencies on co-occurring mental health and substance-use disorders. “I’ve been able to consult with community agencies on program development, implementation of evidence-based practices, and outcome assessment. I’ve evaluated a number of clinical programs throughout Illinois and worked with advocacy and professional groups to influence state mental health and substance abuse policy. I love working with providers and programs to improve services, and the learning goes both ways. What I learn from them helps me keep my teaching grounded in real-world practice.”

In some cases, SSA faculty are the driving force on local projects. Professor Sydney Hans launched the University of Chicago Doula project several years ago, for example, as a platform to examine how visits by a doula to the home of new parents can improve outcomes such as the initiation of breastfeeding and instill coping strategies for stress. The project served more than 200 mothers, and initial research results show improvements in measures such as mother/infant interaction.

Helen Ross Professor Sarah Gehlert has ensured that community connections are part of her research on the relationship between African-American women living in a distressed community and high rates of a particularly lethal form of breast cancer. The project’s transdisciplinary team of researchers has brought in Chicago Public Schools high school students as “apprentices,” launched an outreach program on the South Side about breast cancer awareness, and created a video program on teen health that is now being used in many CPS high schools.

“We heard in focus groups that students were turned off by health class that just told them what not to do—don’t do drugs, don’t have sex. They’re not learning how to be the steward of their body, how to live a long life,” Gehlert says. “We created this DVD to talk about issues of wellness in an approachable, interesting way. Several high schools have used it in class, and now we’ve heard that CPS wants 400 copies to be used throughout its high schools.”

SSA itself has been involved with programs in Chicago, as well. In 1968, the School broke ground on the Woodlawn Social Services Center, a single place where residents of the distressed community could come for substance-abuse



SSA students at the Brickyard Garden, a community garden project in Woodlawn, 2008

counseling, public assistance, childcare, healthcare, and more. For years, the center helped hundreds of local residents, with SSA faculty and students deeply involved with its administration and services. “The idea was that people shouldn’t have to go to six different places for social services,” Marsh says. “The center was an early manifestation of an idea that we’re still working on today in the field of social services in different forms with co-located services and integrated services.”

More recently, SSA has been a resource at the Gary Comer Youth Center and the Paul Revere Elementary School, a CPS community school in the evolving Greater Grand Crossing neighborhood. Working with the Comer Science and Education Foundation, which supports expanded programming at the two facilities, SSA’s Barbara Jackson trained and coached staff, designed the internship program, and facilitated the design of evaluation and tracking models.

Students and Alumni

SSA has had another impact on the Comer Center and Revere Elementary—masters students from the School provide counseling, youth development services, and administrative support through the School’s field placement program. SSA has always been a leader in establishing work in the field as part of the education for social work students, and that legacy has provided a small army of prepared, dedicated students to Chicago institutions.

Today, SSA’s Office of Field Education has developed partnerships with more than 600 agencies across the Chicago metropolitan area. SSA

students put in about 225,000 hours of work in the 2007-08 academic year, providing clinical and administrative expertise to agencies involved in everything from homelessness to criminal justice, from family services to mental health.

For example, at H.O.M.E., which provides low-income Chicago seniors with assistance to live independently, SSA students have worked directly with clients, handled administrative tasks from scheduling to budgeting, and developed a project plan to expand bus services for shopping, including a needs assessment and marketing materials. “In my first year here a few years ago, we had one student through the field placement program and it went quite well. This year we are going to have seven students,” says Executive Director Paul Dean, an SSA graduate. “They’re outstanding students. They have the ability to think critically and to problem solve.”

Susan Knight, the director of field education at SSA, says that a new aspect of the field placement program, the macro project, is providing another asset to the partners by requiring students to take the initiative on a “big picture” aspect of the agency, in addition to the day-to-day work. “The breadth of what students do in field placements has really grown,” she says. “We had a student at an agency that works with developmentally disabled adults revive an energy conservation plan and incorporate the residents so they can become involved. One student helped an organization prepare a transition plan because they were facing the retirement of a long-time executive director. Another wrote a grant that



Classrooms at SSA, left to right: Professor Wilma Walker in the 1940s, Jeanne Marsh in the 1980s, SSA students in the 1950s

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Harold Richman

brought an agency \$50,000 in funding.”

The biggest impact that students provide, however, is when they become graduates, utilizing the top-notch preparation and education from the School for an entire career. With 100 years of alumni, SSA has provided the human infrastructure required to run hundreds of social service agencies, community-based organizations, advocacy groups, schools, and government agencies throughout Chicago and into the suburbs. As early as 1912, graduates were in management at institutions such as the Juvenile Protective Association, the United Charities, and the Immigrants Protective League—and SSA alumni have been an integral part of Chicago’s social welfare and policy world ever since.

“I rarely go to an agency where I don’t meet an SSA graduate who is working to help clients improve their lives,” McCracken says. “And there usually is an SSA graduate supervising program operations or in senior administration. When our faculty is out in the field, we’re always meeting former students.”

“SSA has a really good reputation in Chicago for producing ambitious, idealistic social workers who come with the policy, the administrative, and the clinical perspective,” says Bess Hart, an SSA alum and the counseling director of the Chicago’s Women’s Health Center. “By producing such professional and ambitious people, [SSA] goes a long way to influence agency policy, state policy, or federal policy.”

Catholic Charities, which operates more than 160 programs that impacts the lives of more than a million people throughout Cook and Lake counties annually, has had nearly two dozen SSA graduates on staff over the years, from counselors to senior managers. Rev. Roger Coughlin, who graduated

from SSA in 1964, served as the agency’s director of family and community services; one of his hires was Wendy Seifert, Class of 1971, who has worked for the agency for more than 30 years, currently as the division manager of senior social services and health care. “We always felt that SSA was a quality program,” says Don Kent, who served as Catholic Charity’s executive director from 1964 to 1997.

Social Work and National Policy

As a premier social work school, SSA’s impact goes far beyond the city limits, and it has been a defining force on the field of social work itself from the start.

“I doubt that there is a single history of social work that doesn’t place SSA at the early headwaters of social work education,” says Jerry Floersch, an associate professor at the Mandel School of Applied Social Sciences at Case Western Reserve University and a graduate of SSA. “And during all the eras of social work—when the profession was defining how you do social work with casework methods, when models were being tested, as more faculty today have research science degrees—SSA has been leading and influencing the field.”

Research from the School has been taught in social work programs throughout the country, helping untold thousands of practitioners, agency administrators, and policymakers do a better job helping distressed individuals and communities. Lillian Ripple’s *Motivation, Capacity, and Opportunity: Studies in Casework Theory and Practice*, which distilled many of the



SSA Class of 1934

lessons learned at the SSA Research Center in the 1950s, was a common text for many social work schools, for example, as was Helen Harris Perlman's *Casework: A Problem-Solving Process*.

More contemporary work, such as Mose and Sylvia Firestone Professor Emerita Froma Walsh's work on resilience-oriented family-centered therapy and William J. Reid and Laura Epstein's task-centered model, continue to be influential in the classroom. "[The task-centered model] has become a core or primary model that basically every student learns in one way or another during their training," notes Matthias Naleppa, an associate professor at the School of Social Work at Virginia Commonwealth University. "It's been applied to a whole range of client populations—anywhere from school-age children to the elderly—and to problems from substance abuse to family problems."

SSA's influence on social work started early, including publishing one of the first academic journals in the field, *Social Service Review*, which has been edited by faculty since its inception in 1927. Dean Edith Abbott was committed to spreading the School's graduate and research-based model of social work education throughout the U.S., a goal that began SSA's history of providing faculty and administrative leaders to schools of social work nationwide.

"When you look at the deans of social work and social welfare over the years, you'll see that SSA is a constant presence," says Dolores Norton, SSA's Samuel Deutsch Professor. The founder and first dean of the University of Kansas School of Social Welfare, Esther Twente, was an SSA graduate, for example, as was Elizabeth Wisner, the first female dean of the Tulane School of Social Work, and Lynn

Videka, the former dean and current vice-president for research at the School of Social Welfare at the University of Albany, SUNY.

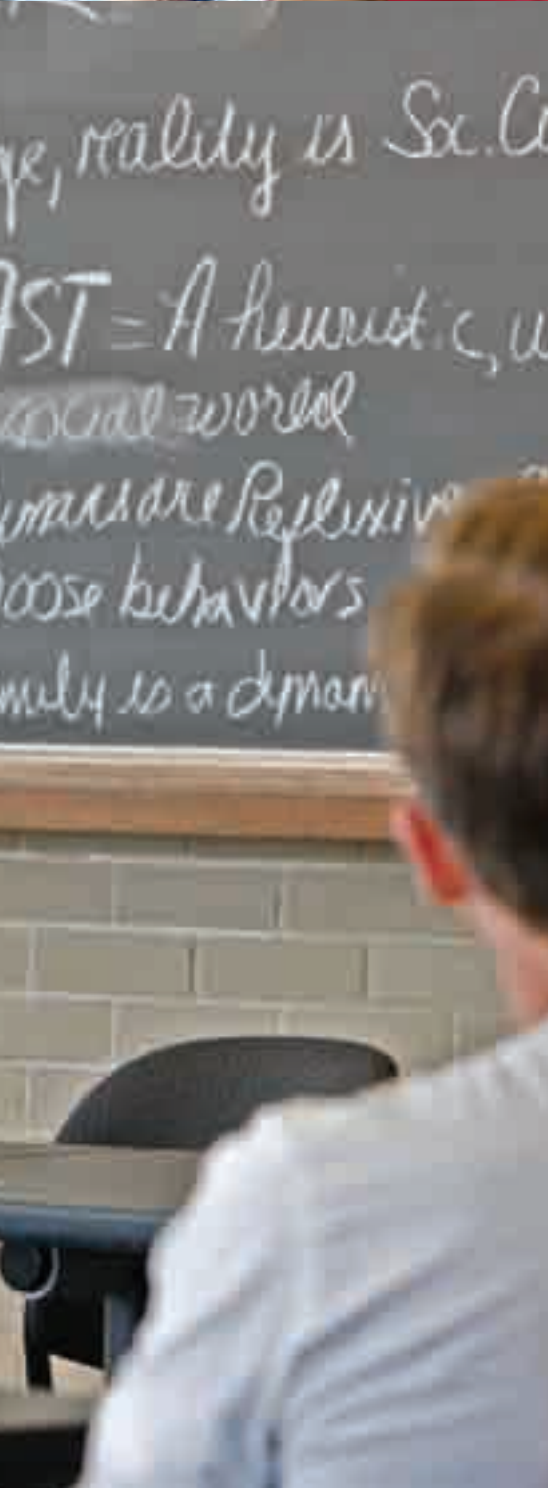
The faculty at SSA have also been directly involved with influencing national policy. The most obvious early example is the School's relationship with the Children's Bureau of the U.S. Department of Labor, headed first by Chicago School of Civics and Philanthropy faculty member Julia Lathrop. Her replacement, Grace Abbott, who taught at the School while serving as the director of Chicago's Immigrants' Protective League, helped pass legislation that provided the first federal grants-in-aid for social welfare purposes, used film, radio, and publications to help mothers learn more about children's needs, and became the foremost advocate for federal aid for relief to destitute children during the Depression.

Like Lathrop, Grace Abbott also maintained a strong relationship with SSA during her time at the Children's Bureau, and her sister Edith's advice and support was instrumental in helping steer the bureau's unprecedented use of statistics and research into legislative policy-making. Under Grace Abbott's leadership, the bureau funded more than 100 social research investigations, many undertaken by SSA, on topics as varied as child labor, maternal mortality, and juvenile justice.

"Much that was going on in Washington on Monday had its influence on what was taught in the School of Social Service Administration on Tuesday, and the research that was going on in the School must have had its impact in Washington. The Abbott sisters were in close contact," wrote the *University of Chicago Magazine* in a November 1964 article about the Abbotts.



Authors of the task-centered model: Laura Epstein and William J. Reid



Grace Abbott's time at the Children's Bureau also provided her with the reputation and connections to advise the U.S. Committee on Economic Security during the Depression and be instrumental in helping to draft key provisions of President Franklin Delano Roosevelt's Social Security Act. "Grace Abbott's contributions include the provisions of Title IV and Title V, which established the Aid to Dependent Children, Child Welfare, Maternal and Child Health, and Crippled Children's Service programs," Stuart says.

Today, SSA graduates are found throughout the policy, advocacy, and research establishment of Washington, including the recent head of the federal Department of Health and Human Services Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration (SAMHSA), Charles Curie.

Despite SSA's national and international influence, it's the city that houses the School that has gained the most from its 100 years. "SSA has been both a critical and very positive force in the Chicago area. It's contributed in drawing a network of very strong social service executives and clinicians and social policy analysts to Chicago and training and supporting them once they were there. And it's been the source of a very powerful set of ideas that have influenced the city in positive ways," says Henry Webber, the executive vice chancellor for administration at Washington University in St. Louis, who served as vice president for community and government affairs at the University of Chicago for more than a decade.

"It is those roles of attracting people, training people, and then generating ideas that mark its contribution," Webber says. "And it's a big contribution." 🍷

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HENRY WEBBER



For more on SSA's Centennial, including an interactive timeline, profiles of distinguished alumni and faculty, features on the School's history, and how to participate in SSA's future, visit our Centennial site at ssacentennial.uchicago.edu/history.