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NASW's Supervisory Leaders in Aging: One-year practice change outcomes of an innovative training program for social work supervisors

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ABSTRACT

Social work supervision addresses professional development, staff support, and management of direct service workers. It is important in aging-services settings because of the impacts of complex and evolving biopsychosocial forces in clients' lives. This article presents findings of the Supervisory Leaders in Aging (SLA) study based on data available one-year post completion. SLA is a 30-hour certificate program for supervisors from aging-services settings addressing best practices in supervision of gerontological practice. The study compares participants' self-assessment of use of supervisory best practices before attending a 3-month workshop series and at two times following graduation. This article reports findings from the analysis of data provided by 114 out of 129 supervisors who completed the program. Participants increased the frequency of use of best practices at both three and 12 months after graduation. These increases were conceptually meaningful and statistically significant among participants who were low users of best practices prior to the program. SLA has led to significant adoption and maintenance of supervisory best practices among participating social work supervisors and especially among those who have not previously adopted routine use of best practices. The interactive small-group learning activities of SLA's educational model should be promoted and the curriculum of best practices should be further refined and tested as SLA is implemented in other communities.

KEYWORDS

Best practice; evaluation; measurement; social worker; supervision; training in aging; continuing education; workforce-training needs

Background and objectives

Agency-based supervision has been a mainstay of the social work profession and an essential ingredient in skilled direct practice (Kadushin & Harkness, 2014). Supervision is no less important in the social services provided to older adults often by staff without professional training who are confronted by the complex biological, psychological, and social problems of their older clients. The MSW supervisors to whom they turn for guidance in these cases frequently lack the required supervisory skills that include teaching and a gerontological knowledge base (Center for Health Workforce Studies, School of Public Health, University at Albany, 2006; Whitaker, Weismiller, & Clark, 2006a). A significant

number of schools of social work do not provide training in supervisory skills, and supervision is not listed as a core competency with the Council on Social Work Education's *Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards* (Council on Social Work Education, 2015). This article follows a 2018 article describing in detail the need for the program and its components and demonstrated feasibility and acceptability (Kaplan, Silverstone, Zlotnik, Herman, & Touma, 2018).

Program description and implementation

To address the need for enhanced supervision in the delivery of agency-based social services to older adults, the National Association of Social Workers (NASW) in 2015 conducted a 3-year supervisor training program in four regions of the country through its local chapters. Entitled "Supervisory Leaders in Aging" (SLA) the program was modeled on four pilot programs conducted in New York City between 2010 and 2014 under the auspices of the Helen Rehr Center for Social Work Practice. The subsequent SLA undertaking, supported by a grant from the John A. Hartford Foundation, comprised a total of eight programs with a uniform curriculum. While there are some interdisciplinary settings in which social service providers are not supervised by social workers, in this study the participants were required to be master level social workers actively supervising in agencies serving older adults. These included health care and mental health-care settings, substance abuse programs, as well as community-based agencies exclusively serving older adults.

The framework of the SLA curriculum was designed to adhere to established theories of adult learning that call for small in-person group settings, a balance of interactional and didactic

learning and a grounding in the everyday experiences of the learner (Brookfield, 1995; Knowles, 1984). To these ends, the size of the participating cohorts was limited to 25 and the five full-day workshops were held bi-weekly over a three-month period. The spacing of the workshops not only accommodated the demands of participants' work schedules but gave them space to reflect on the content of each workshop in relation to their everyday experiences. The curriculum itself was based largely on a gerontological knowledge base related to the complex bio-psycho-social problems common in late life and best practices in social work supervision and direct practice with older adults and their families. Curriculum content areas relevant to the mental health and physical challenges of late life and their interactions, including common health and mental health issues, elder mistreatment, and family caregiving, were further illustrated through the use of case examples in class exercises. Based on feedback from the earlier pilot programs in New York City, emphasis was placed on group supervision and the teaching of social work assessment skills and content including mental health and elder abuse.

The SLA program was implemented by NASW through its chapters in Maryland, New York, Florida, and Illinois. Three factors determined the selection of the chapters: 1) the chapter's interest in managing the program; 2) the chapter's strength as a continuing education provider; and 3) the chapter's geographical location ensuring that four different regions of the county were represented. Workshop instructors were enlisted from local agencies and schools of social work. Each of the chapters drew on their extensive distribution lists to market the program. Several functions of the

program were centralized and managed by the NASW Foundation and a National Coordinating Center. These included the development of a uniform curriculum for nine of the 10 workshops with one workshop left to the discretion of the local chapter. Also centralized was an online application and process and outcome evaluations. The chapters were responsible for recruitment and management of the training program under uniform guidelines provided by the national office Coordinating Team.

The evaluation of this program implementation included both the assessment of program feasibility and acceptability, which relied on indicators of program adoption and delivery, and the assessment of program impacts, which relied on outcomes measurement. The feasibility and acceptability of SLA and its educational model, previously described by Kaplan et al. (2018), were demonstrated by the evaluations of the participants, instructors, and NASW Chapter coordinators. Process evaluations were conducted immediately after each of 10 workshops by the participants from eight trainee cohorts who rated on a 5-point scale their measure of knowledge attainment, the relevance of and sophistication of material, the likelihood of using what was learned, and the effectiveness of the instructor. Reviews from the 1,288 workshop process evaluations, both qualitative and quantitative, were very positive across topics and sites. Of particular note pertaining to the educational model was the high value placed by the participants on the live in-person learning environment and group interaction. Program coordinators and instructors highly rated the degree to which the workshops focused on relevant supervisory practices, the incorporation of best practices within the curriculum, and the degree of participant empowerment and participation. There were lower ratings by instructors on their facilitation of discussion of social work values, cultural competence, and racial equity suggesting guidance to future SLA instructors in integrating social justice skills into their workshops.

Objectives

This paper reports the final findings from the assessment of program outcomes that include educational impacts on the supervisory practices of participants. The objectives of the study include:

- 1) Determine the statistical significance of preliminary changes in self-reported ratings of frequency of use of supervisory best practices among SLA participants at 3-month post-graduation as compared to pre-program ratings
- 2) Determine the statistical significance of enduring changes in self-reported ratings of frequency of use of supervisory best practices among SLA participants at 12-month post-graduation as compared to pre-program ratings
- 3) Determine the statistical significance of differences in preliminary and enduring changes in self-reported ratings of frequency of use of supervisory best practices among low users (those with an average pre-program, cross-workshop frequency rating of 2.99 or below on the 4-point measure) and high users of best practices (those with an average pre-program, cross-workshop frequency rating of 3 to 4)

Research design and methods

Sample

The sample in this study comprises social workers employed as supervisors at various settings in Illinois, Florida, Maryland, and New York City. The inclusion criteria for participants required current social work licensure, employment as a supervisor, and supervisory oversight of some combination of social workers (i.e., those with BSW or MSW degrees) and social service employees (e.g., case managers). Eight trainee cohorts were recruited for this program with two cycles of training hosted by each of the four participating NASW Chapters. A range of 15–20 participants per cohort is promoted in the SLA educational model due to the effectiveness of group engagement with this size group.

The SLA program adopted in these four sites (IL, FL, MD, and NY) selected 139 applicants for enrollment in the program based on inclusion criteria. Ten participants were lost to attrition as they withdrew during the program due to conflicts that prevented attendance at two or more training sessions, resulting in 129 supervisors

Table 1. Distributions on variables used as regression covariates- Retained compared to dropped participants.

	Retained Participants (n = 114)	Dropped (n = 17)	χ^2 (df)
Race	n (%)	n (%)	
Non-Hispanic White	62 (54.4%)	8 (53.3%)	2.46 (4)
African American	12 (10.5%)	0 (0%)	
LatinX	10 (8.8%)	0 (0%)	
AAPI	3 (2.6%)	1 (6.7%)	
Not Reported	27 (23.7%)	6 (40.0%)	
Gender			
Male	14 (12.3%)	2 (13.3%)	0.93 (2)
Female	96 (84.2%)	11 (73.3%)	
Prefer not to answer	4 (3.5%)	2 (13.3%)	
Age ¹	46.7 (11.5)	56.4 (10.8)	2.13 (86)*
Serving majority older adults (y/n)	100 (87.7%)	8 (53.3%)	1.90 (1)
Licensure status (y/n)	110 (96.5%)	11 (73.3%)	0.55 (1)
	mean (S.D.)	mean (S.D.)	
Years since MSW	16.4 (11.2)	20.5 (9.8)	0.95 (128)
Years working as a supervisor	10.3 (8.7)	6.2 (7.3)	1.29 (129)
Number of MSW supervisees	4.4 (5.5)	0 (0%)	2.31 (129)*
Proportion working in practice setting §	n (%)	n (%)	
Health services	54 (47.4%)	2 (17.7%)	5.32 (1)*
Mental health services	26 (22.8%)	4 (23.8%)	0.004 (1)
Aging services	67 (58.8%)	7 (41.2%)	1.86 (1)
Family services	17 (14.9%)	3 (17.7%)	0.09 (1)
Other setting	10 (8.8%)	1 (5.9%)	0.16 (1)
Previous supervisory training §	n (%)	n (%)	
Grad course on clinical supervision	23 (20.2%)	4 (23.5%)	0.10 (1)
Grad course on field instruction	28 (24.6%)	6 (35.3%)	0.89 (1)
Grad course on administrative supervision/management	19 (16.7%)	0 (0%)	3.21 (1)
Post-grad workshop/training on clinical supervision	56 (49.1%)	8 (47.1%)	0.03 (1)
Post-grad workshop/training on field instruction	67 (58.8%)	7 (41.2%)	1.86 (1)
Post-grad workshop/training on administrative supervision/management	42 (36.8%)	5 (29.40%)	0.36 (1)

§ Categories are not mutually exclusive

Statistical Significance: * p = 0.05 ** p = 0.01 *** p = 0.001

1. Only 79 retained participants (69%) reported their age, and 9 (53%) dropped participants reported their age.

Table 2. Distributions on variables used as regression covariates- high and low overall users of best practices at time of pretest¹.

	All Participants (n = 114)	High Users (n = 12)	Low Users (n = 102)	χ^2 (df) ³
Race	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	
Non-Hispanic White	62 (54.4%)	6 (50.0%)	56 (54.9%)	3.35 (4)
African American	12 (10.5%)	2 (25.0%)	9 (8.8%)	
LatinX	10 (8.8%)	1 (8.3%)	9 (8.8%)	
AAPI	3 (2.6%)	0 (0.0%)	3 (2.9%)	
Not Reported	27 (23.7%)	2 (16.7%)	25 (24.5%)	
Gender				
Male	14 (12.3%)	1 (8.3%)	13 (12.3%)	0.73 (2)
Female	96 (84.2%)	11 (91.7%)	85 (83.3%)	
Prefer not to answer	4 (3.5%)	0 (0.0%)	4 (3.9%)	
Age ²	46.7 (11.5)	50.2 (16.4)	46.5 (11.1)	0.75 (77)
Serving majority older adults (y/n)	100 (87.7%)	10 (83.3%)	90 (88.2%)	0.24 (1)
Licensure status (y/n)	110 (96.5%)	11 (91.7%)	99 (97.1%)	0.92 (1)
	mean (S.D.)	mean (S.D.)	mean (S.D.)	
Years since MSW	16.4 (11.2)	23.4 (15.7)	15.6 (10.3)	2.33 (112)*
Years working as a supervisor	10.3 (8.7)	15.9 (10.5)	9.6 (8.2)	2.44 (112)*
Number of MSW supervisees	4.4 (5.5)	5.3 (6.8)	4.2 (5.4)	0.65 (112)
Proportion working in practice setting §	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	
Health services	54 (47.4%)	9 (75.0%)	45 (44.1%)	4.11 (1)*
Mental health services	26 (22.8%)	4 (33.3%)	22 (21.6%)	0.84 (1)
Aging services	67 (58.8%)	9 (75.0%)	58 (56.9%)	1.46 (1)
Family services	17 (14.9%)	3 (25.0%)	14 (14.9%)	1.08 (1)
Other setting	10 (8.8%)	0 (0%)	10 (9.9%)	1.29 (1)
Previous supervisory training §	n (%)	n (%)	n (%)	
Grad course on clinical supervision	23 (20.2%)	4 (33.3%)	19 (18.6%)	1.44 (1)
Grad course on field instruction	28 (24.6%)	4 (33.3%)	24 (23.5%)	0.55 (1)
Grad course on administrative supervision/ management	19 (16.7%)	3 (25.0%)	16 (15.7%)	0.67 (1)
Post-grad workshop/training on clinical supervision	56 (49.1%)	5 (41.7%)	51 (50.0%)	0.30 (1)
Post-grad workshop/training on field instruction	67 (58.8%)	8 (66.7%)	59 (57.8%)	0.35 (1)
Post-grad workshop/training on administrative supervision/management	42 (36.8%)	5 (41.7%)	37 (36.3%)	0.13 (1)

§ Categories are not mutually exclusive

Statistical Significance: * $p = 0.05$ ** $p = 0.01$ *** $p = 0.001$

1. High and low users are sorted by their use of best practices for all nine workshops.

2. Only 79 participants (69%) reported their age.

3. χ^2 reported on comparisons of High and Low users.

who completed the program. Characteristics of the sample are reported in detail in Kaplan et al. (2018). However, it is noteworthy that these 129 participants reportedly supervised more than 1200 staff who serve more than 265,000 older adults annually.

The following descriptive results are presented for 114 participants who provided complete data on their demographic and supervisory characteristics, complete data on the outcomes measure at all three time points, and were actively supervising staff at all three time points (see Table 1). The 15 people who began the program but were not included in these analyses include those who were not actively supervising at the time of data collection and could not therefore reflect on their current practice and did not provide reliable results for comparisons at both post-program data collection time-points. Although this sample of subjects who were omitted from analysis was too small to conduct meaningful statistical analyses to compare against those who were included in the reported study findings, there did not appear to be any notable differences in demographic characteristics. The included sample can be described as

largely female (84.2%) and comprising mostly licensed social workers (96.5%) who reported serving a majority of older adults or all older clients (87.7%). The average age of participants was 47 years old ($M = 46.5$, $SD = 11.5$), and most identified as Non-Hispanic White (54.4%), followed by African American (10.5%), LatinX (8.8%), and Asian or Pacific Islander (3.0%), with many who chose not to report race (23.7%). Participants reported that the average length of time since receiving their MSW degrees was 16 years ($M = 16.4$, $SD = 11.2$) and they worked as supervisors for an average of 10 years ($M = 10.3$, $SD = 8.7$). Participants supervised an average of 4 MSW students ($M = 4.4$, $SD = 5.5$). A majority of all participants (67 out of 114) worked in aging services (58.8%).

Analysis in this study was conducted with data from all participants as well as in consideration of whether participants were high users or low users of best practices. High users were those who reported an average score of 3 (often) to 4 (very often) across all nine workshops before attending the program, while low users reported an average score of 2.99 or below.

Across all 9 core curriculum workshops, the high users group included 12 supervisors and the low users group included 102 supervisors (see [Table 2](#)). High users on average had more years of experience since their MSWs ($M = 23.4$, $SD = 15.7$), more years working as supervisors ($M = 15.9$, $SD = 10.5$), and more MSW supervisees ($M = 5.3$, $SD = 6.8$). Low users on average completed their MSW more recently ($M = 15.6$ years, $SD = 10.3$), worked fewer years as a supervisor ($M = 9.6$, $SD = 8.2$), and supervised fewer MSWs ($M = 4.2$, $SD = 5.4$).

Measures and data collection

Evaluation instruments were developed for the program, including outcomes evaluation surveys to measure changes in the frequency of use of best practices among participating supervisors. The National Coordinating Center (NCC) designed evaluation instruments to reflect SLA's core curriculum and program structure in order to allow the uniform utilization of these instruments at each training site. The NCC directly managed evaluation surveys of participating supervisors through a secure online surveying platform.

The SLA curriculum is built upon 30 supervisory best practices, with each of the ten workshops designed to reinforce the continual use of three such practices (see [Figure 1](#)). Trainees' self-rated frequency of use of supervisory best-practices was measured with the Practice Inventory for Supervisors in Aging Services, a novel instrument comprising 30-items that match the best practices which serve as the learning objectives in the program's curriculum. This instrument was designed to help supervisors self-evaluate their professional practices related to the skills and knowledge being enhanced through participation in the Supervisory Leaders in Aging training program. Each three-hour workshop was built upon a curricular framework of three relevant supervisory best practices.

The instrument designed to measure the use of these best practices asks participants to rate how often they have used the supervisory practice in the past three months on a 4-point Likert-type scale. The instructions on the instrument read as follows: "Thinking about your work as a supervisor over the past three months, rate each of the supervisory practices listed below as something you have done Very Often, Often, Rarely, or Not At All. If the phrasing of the questionnaire item is unclear, choose Don't Understand." Thus, indicators of the frequency of use of supervisory best practices range from 1 (Not at All) to 4 (Very Often).

SLA Curriculum Workshop Titles	
#1	Advancing Skills in Individual Supervision
#2	Advancing Skills in Group Supervision
#3	Strengthening Social Work Leadership in Interdisciplinary Practice
#4	Expanding Knowledge of Mental Health in Late Life
#5	Heightening Awareness of Older Adult Self-Neglect and Mistreatment
#6	Supervising Social Service Staff in their Work with Families
#7	Teaching Gerontological Social Work Assessment Skills
#8	Measuring Outcomes of Gerontological Social Work Practice
#9	Translating Research Evidence into Gerontological Social Work Practice
#10a	Promoting Culturally Competent Gerontological Practice §
#10b	Supporting Staff in Ethical Practice §
§ This workshop was selected at two of four sites as the elective topic, meaning all participants were exposed to the same nine workshop topics which comprise the core curriculum as well as one of two elective topics.	

Figure 1. SLA curriculum workshop titles.

Those who reported “Don’t Understand” were dropped from the analysis (see below). Preliminary analyses were conducted on reliability and validity. Findings demonstrate good internal consistency reliability ($\alpha = 0.88$). Exploratory factor analysis indicates that the strongest three factors that emerged account for 74.4% of the variability in all items.

Prior to the first workshop, participants were asked by e-mail to complete an online inventory of their own use of these best practices within the recent months leading up to the SLA training (time 1). Graduates were later asked to complete the same online instrument 3 months after graduation (time 2) and again 1 year after graduation (time 3). E-Mail requests for survey completion were sent at the beginning of each data collection period with reminder messages every other week for 2 months. The data collection effort succeeded in gathering valid survey responses from 114 participants at time 1 (86%), 93 participants at time 2 (67%), and 67 participants at time 3 (48%).

Analysis

Initial descriptive analysis was conducted to examine the average use of best practices among participants for each of the nine core workshops and the two elective workshops at time 1, time 2, and time 3. Workshop-level analyses are based on the average frequency of use of all three best practices measured for the workshop. Each of the 9 core workshops and 2 complementary workshops included 3 questions, and results were summed up and divided by the number of items so they can be interpreted at the workshop level. Dependent sample t-tests were used to determine statistically significant differences in the use of best practices from time 1 to time 2 (preliminary practice change), and from time 1 to

time 3 (enduring practice change) for participants in individual workshops and across the program as a whole (all workshops). A correction for multiple comparisons was made for the interpretation of results based on a more conservative threshold for significance ($p < .001$). We calculated Cohen's d for statistically significant differences found in the results of our t -tests. We interpreted effect sizes as small, medium, and large as 0.15, 0.40, and 0.75 respectively (Brydges, 2019). Regression analyses were conducted to examine factors related to the use of best practices (preliminary practice change & enduring practice change), accounting for characteristics of individual participants (i.e., years of practice experience, years of experience as a supervisor) and employment setting (i.e., health, mental health, aging services, or family services).

Missing data due to non-response at the item level for questions regarding best practices were observed within participant characteristics data. Non-response was more common during time 2 and time 3, and the missing data were determined to be missing at random which allowed for use of multiple imputation techniques (Allison, 2002; Raudenbush & Bryk, 2002). In this study, missing data were addressed through the use of Multiple Imputation by Chained Equations (MICE). The advantages of this commonly used approach are that it can easily accommodate complex patterns of missing data and different types of data structures, and it accounts for model uncertainty as well as sampling uncertainty (Hill, 2009). Ten complete imputed datasets were generated using the MICE approach to address non-response in this study with variables regarding each participant's characteristics (i.e. years since receiving MSW, licensure status, gender, employment setting, proportion of older clients on caseload, years at the organization, years as supervisor, number of supervisees, number of MSW supervisees, number of BSW supervisees, training since receiving MSW, and site location). Pooled analyses of all ten imputed datasets were used to answer the research questions of this study. Validation tests were conducted to determine that participants with missing data were not statistically different from those who completed all three time points in regard to supervisory characteristics and best practices outcomes. Stata 15 was used for all of the analyses of this study.

Results

Best practice use outcomes

Table 3 presents the average use of best practices at three time points (pre-program, 3 months post-graduation, 12 months post-graduation). Table 4 describes the results of t -test analyses for preliminary practice change (time 2- time 1). Table 5 describes the results of t -test analyses conducted to determine differences enduring practice change (time 3- time 1). Participants were categorized as low and high pre-program users of supervisory best practices in Tables 4 and 5. Overall, findings indicated that preliminary practice change, defined as the change in use of best practices from pre-program to 3 months post-graduation, was positive and significant for all nine core curriculum workshops (see Table 4). Participants who remained in the study at 3 months post-graduation reported an average use of best practices at 2.80 ($SD = 0.44$), which is significantly higher than before the workshops at 2.48 ($SD = 0.52$); dependent sample $t[113] = 5.61$, $p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.67$). In addition, enduring practice change, defined as the change in use of best practices from pre-program to 12 months post-graduation, was positive and significant

Table 3. Scores on Practice Inventory for Supervisors in Aging Services (PISAS).

Workshop Topic	Time 1 (Pre-Program)		Time 2 (3 months post-graduation)		Time 3 (12 months post-graduation)	
	<i>n</i>	mean (S.D.)	<i>n</i>	mean (S.D.)	<i>n</i>	mean (S.D.)
Advancing Skills in Individual Supervision	114	2.789(0.488)	114	3.088(0.603)	114	3.143(0.406)
Advancing Skills in Group Supervision	114	2.190(0.895)	114	2.587 (0.945)	114	2.592 (0.953)
Strengthening Social Work Leadership in Interdisciplinary Practice	114	2.953 (0.635)	114	3.085 (0.654)	114	3.094 (0.572)
Expanding Knowledge of Mental Health in Late Life	114	2.807 (0.627)	114	2.996 (0.682)	114	2.952 (0.609)
Heightening Awareness of Older Adult Self-Neglect and Mistreatment	114	2.781 (0.755)	114	2.903 (0.647)	114	2.848 (0.691)
Supervising Social Service Staff in their Work with Families	114	2.798 (0.625)	114	3.049 (0.586)	114	3.016 (0.724)
Teaching Gerontological Social Work Assessment Skills	114	2.129 (0.675)	114	2.772 (0.788)	114	2.802 (0.716)
Measuring Outcomes of Gerontological Social Work Practice	114	1.769 (0.829)	114	2.285 (0.745)	114	2.211 (0.721)
Translating Research Evidence into Gerontological Social Work Practice	114	2.100 (0.743)	114	2.452 (0.785)	114	2.532 (0.595)
Promoting Culturally Competent Gerontological Practice §	62	2.688 (0.661)	62	2.966 (0.695)	62	2.990 (1.010)
Supporting Staff in Ethical Practice §	52	2.923 (0.451)	52	3.136 (0.651)	52	2.986 (2.712)
All 9 Core Curriculum Workshops	114	2.480 (0.439)	114	2.802 (0.518)	114	2.799 (0.353)

§ This workshop was selected at two of four sites as the optional topic, meaning all participants were exposed to the same nine workshop topics which comprise the core curriculum as well as one of two optional topics.

overall (see Table 5), suggesting that the effect size for gains in competencies were large, and this was maintained from 2.48 (SD = 0.52) to 12 months post program at 2.80 (SD = 0.35; dependent sample $t[113] = 7.55, p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.80$). For all nine core workshops, low users on average were found to have larger gains in their use of best practices in terms of preliminary practice change from pre-program at 2.37 (SD = 0.32) to 3 months post program at 2.79 (SD = 0.50; dependent sample $t[101] = 8.11, p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.02$). Similarly, low users reported large gains in enduring practice change from pre-program at 2.37 (SD = 0.32) to 12 months post program at 2.78 (SD = 0.35; dependent sample $t[101] = 10.58, p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 1.22$; see Table 5). Conversely, high users were found to have no statistical changes in their use of best practices in terms of preliminary practice change and non-significant findings on enduring practice change. Subsequent t-test analyses were conducted to examine between-group differences in preliminary practice change and enduring practice change for low users and high users in order to confirm the reliability and robustness of results. Findings indicated the reported mean differences were statistically significantly different for low and high users at $p < .001$ for all workshops.

Findings varied, however, by specific workshops. *Teaching Gerontological Social Work Assessment Skills* and *Measuring Outcomes of Gerontological Social Work Practice* had the largest magnitude of positive change in use of best practices in terms of both preliminary practice change (see Table 4) and enduring practice change (see Table 5). For all participants, their use of best practices in teaching gerontological assessment skills was at 2.13 (SD = 0.68) during pre-program, at 2.77 (SD = 0.79) during 3 months post-graduation (dependent sample $t[113] = 7.53, p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.87$), and at 2.80 (SD = 0.72) at 12 months post-graduation (dependent sample $t[113] = 9.03, p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.96$). Similarly, use of best

Table 4. Preliminary changes in practice for supervisors in aging services at 3 months post-program.

Workshop Topic	Preliminary Practice Change Full Sample				Preliminary Practice Change Low Users Only				Preliminary Practice Change High Users Only			
	n	t (df)	SE	mean diff. (S.D.)	n	t (df)	SE	mean diff. (S.D.)	n	t (df)	SE	mean diff. (S.D.)
Advancing Skills in Individual Supervision	114	4.38 (113)	0.07	0.30 (0.73)***	56	6.13 (55)	0.09	0.56 (0.68)***	58	0.52 (57)	0.09	0.05 (0.69)
Advancing Skills in Group Supervision	114	4.31 (113)	0.09	0.40 (0.98)***	82	6.54 (81)	0.10	0.64 (0.88)***	32	-1.27 (31)	0.17	-0.22 (0.97)
Strengthening Social Work Leadership in Interdisciplinary Practice	114	1.65 (113)	0.08	0.13 (0.85)***	42	6.78 (41)	0.10	0.69 (0.66)***	72	-2.11 (71)	0.09	-0.19 (0.78)
Expanding Knowledge of Mental Health in Late Life	114	2.43 (113)	0.08	0.19 (0.83)**	54	5.70 (53)	0.73	0.57 (0.73)***	60	-1.53 (59)	0.10	-0.15 (0.77)
Heightening Awareness of Older Adult Self- Neglect and Mistreatment	114	1.43 (113)	0.09	0.12 (0.91)*	64	7.82 (34)	0.07	0.57 (0.58)***	50	-3.39 (49)	0.13	-0.45 (0.94)**
Supervising Social Service Staff in their Work with Families	114	3.20 (113)	0.08	0.25 (0.84)***	56	8.18 (55)	0.09	0.71 (0.65)***	58	-1.87 (57)	0.10	-0.19 (0.77)
Teaching Gerontological Social Work Assessment Skills	114	7.53 (113)	0.09	0.64 (0.91)***	98	8.88 (97)	0.09	0.78 (0.87)***	16	-1.00 (15)	0.18	-0.18 (0.74)
Measuring Outcomes of Gerontological Social Work Practice	114	5.62 (113)	0.09	0.52 (0.98)***	102	7.49 (101)	0.09	0.66 (0.89)***	12	-3.23 (11)	0.23	-0.74 (0.79)**
Translating Research Evidence into Gerontological Social Work Practice	114	4.40 (113)	0.08	0.35 (0.86)***	95	7.05 (47)	0.08	0.53 (0.74)***	19	-2.72 (18)	0.20	-0.54 (0.87)*
Promoting Culturally Competent Gerontological Practice §	62	2.29 (61)	0.12	0.28 (0.96)***	34	4.20 (33)	0.16	0.65 (0.91)***	28	-1.16 (27)	0.15	-0.18 (0.81)
Supporting Staff in Ethical Practice §	52	2.16 (51)	0.10	0.21 (0.71)	22	2.90 (21)	0.14	0.40 (0.65)*	30	0.55 (29)	0.13	0.07 (0.73)
All 9 Core Curriculum Workshops	114	5.61 (113)	0.06	0.32 (0.61)***	102	8.11 (101)	0.05	0.41 (0.52)***	12	-1.91 (11)	0.24	-0.46 (0.83)

Statistical Significance: * p = 0.05 ** p = 0.01 *** p = 0.001

§ This workshop was selected at two of four sites as the optional topic, meaning all participants were exposed to the same nine workshop topics which comprise the core curriculum as well as one of two optional topics.

† Subsequent t-test analyses conducted to examine between group differences in preliminary practice change and enduring practice change for low users and high users indicated the reported mean differences were statistically significantly different for low and high users, at p < 0.001 for all workshops.



Table 5. Enduring changes in practice for supervisors in aging services at 12 months post-program.

Workshop Topic	Sample				Enduring Practice Change (T3-T1) Full				Enduring Practice Change (T3-T1) Low Users Only				Enduring Practice Change (T3-T1) High Users Only					
	n	t	(df)	SE	mean diff.	(S.D.)	n	t	(df)	SE	mean diff.†	(S.D.)	n	t	(df)	SE	mean diff.†	(S.D.)
Advancing Skills in Individual Supervision	114	6.87	(113)	0.05	0.35	(0.55)***	56	11.25	(55)	0.06	0.68	(0.45)***	58	0.71	(57)	0.06	0.04	(0.45)
Advancing Skills in Group Supervision	114	4.19	(113)	0.10	0.40	(1.03)***	82	7.30	(81)	0.10	0.69	(0.86)***	32	-1.85	(31)	0.19	-0.34	(1.05)*
Strengthening Social Work Leadership in Interdisciplinary Practice	114	1.96	(113)	0.07	0.14	(0.77)**	42	5.67	(41)	0.11	0.64	(0.73)***	72	-1.98	(71)	0.07	-0.15	(0.64)
Expanding Knowledge of Mental Health in Late Life	114	2.05	(113)	0.07	0.14	(0.75)***	54	7.20	(53)	0.08	0.58	(0.59)***	60	-2.89	(59)	0.09	-0.25	(0.67)
Heightening Awareness of Older Adult Self-Neglect and Mistreatment	114	0.78	(113)	0.09	0.07	(0.92)*	64	5.96	(63)	0.09	0.54	(0.72)***	50	-4.91	(49)	0.11	-0.54	(0.77)***
Supervising Social Service Staff in their Work with Families	114	2.70	(113)	0.08	0.22	(0.86)***	56	6.81	(55)	0.09	0.64	(0.71)***	58	-1.85	(57)	0.10	-0.19	(0.80)
Teaching Gerontological Social Work Assessment Skills	114	9.03	(113)	0.07	0.67	(0.80)***	98	10.56	(97)	0.08	0.80	(0.75)***	16	-0.99	(15)	0.13	-0.13	(0.54)
Measuring Outcomes of Gerontological Social Work Practice	114	4.65	(113)	0.10	0.44	(1.01)***	102	7.71	(101)	0.08	0.65	(0.85)***	12	-7.31	(11)	0.18	-1.29	(0.61)***
Translating Research Evidence into Gerontological Social Work Practice	114	5.89	(113)	0.07	0.43	(0.78)***	95	8.93	(94)	0.07	0.62	(0.68)***	19	-3.60	(18)	0.14	-0.50	(0.61)**
Promoting Culturally Competent Gerontological Practice §	62	2.58	(61)	0.12	0.30	(0.92)**	34	2.78	(33)	0.16	0.46	(0.96)***	28	0.70	(27)	0.16	0.11	(0.85)
Supporting Staff in Ethical Practice §	52	0.16	(51)	0.38	0.06	(2.77)*	22	2.27	(21)	0.31	0.71	(1.46)**	30	-0.66	(29)	0.62	-0.41	(3.37)
All 9 Core Curriculum Workshops	114	7.55	(113)	0.04	0.32	(0.45)***	102	10.58	(101)	0.04	0.40	(0.38)***	12	-3.80	(11)	0.10	-0.39	(0.36)**

Statistical Significance: * p = 0.05 ** p = 0.01 *** p = 0.001

§ This workshop was selected at two of four sites as the optional topic, meaning all participants were exposed to the same nine workshop topics which comprise the core curriculum as well as one of two optional topics.

† Subsequent t-test analyses conducted to examine between group differences in preliminary practice change and enduring practice change for low users and high users indicated the reported mean differences were statistically significantly different for low and high users, at p < 0.001 for all workshops.

practices in measuring outcomes of gerontological social work practice was at 1.77 (SD = 0.83) during pre-program, at 2.29 (SD = 0.75) during 3 months post-graduation (dependent sample $t[113] = 5.62, p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.66$), and at 2.21 (SD = 0.72) at 12 months post-graduation (dependent sample $t[113] = 4.65, p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.57$).

The curriculum comprises a core set of nine workshop topics that were delivered at all sites. Each site selected one additional topic as the basis for a tenth workshop. Two of the sites chose the topic of *Promoting Culturally Competent Gerontological Practice* and two of the sites chose the topic of *Supporting Staff in Ethical Practice*. Thus, all participants were exposed to the core nine workshop topics as well as one of the two elective topics. Findings indicated that all participants in the *Culturally Competent Practices Workshop* reported moderately more use of best practices in terms of from pre-program at 2.69 (SD = 0.66) to 3 months post-graduation at 2.97 (SD = 0.70; dependent sample $t[61] = 2.29, p < .001$, Cohen's $d = 0.41$), and at 2.99 (SD = 1.01; dependent sample $t[61] = 2.58, p < .01$, Cohen's $d = 0.35$). In terms of the *Ethical Practice Workshop*, we did not find significant increases in the use of best practices for enduring practice change based on the conservative threshold of $p < .001$.

Discussion and implications

The magnitude of overall practice change across the core curriculum and among all participants is statistically significant and ranging from 0.4 to 0.8 increases on a 4-point scale in the self-reported frequency of use of best practices within the low-use group. An improvement of even half a point is noteworthy in this context (1 = never, 2 = seldom, 3 = often, and 4 = very often), especially in the light of the more conservative threshold of significance at $p < .001$. Among participants who were low users of these best practices prior to the program, who account for 89% of the sample, even greater increases of 0.68 points were documented. Findings at 3-month post-graduation were maintained 1 year after graduation, on average. Conceptually, this change in practice represents a shift from the occasional use of best practices to the more consistent and routine use of best practices.

The SLA program has demonstrated effectiveness in achieving the goal of meaningful and sustained adoption of supervisory best practices as set forth here. Coupled with the qualitative feedback described in a previous article addressing the acceptability and feasibility of the program (Kaplan et al., 2018), these findings suggest that the educational model of interactional, small-group learning activities led by experts in social work supervision and relevant gerontological subjects is effective in driving practice change. They also suggest that the curriculum of select supervisory best practices is relevant to the work of the program participants and collectively lend support to the continued use of the SLA educational model and curriculum, and provide additional social work supervisors the opportunity to enhance their supervisory skills.

Despite comparable pre-program levels of use, the best practices associated with workshops topics addressing elder mistreatment, ethics, and geriatric mental health were found to be associated with lower increases in the frequency of use after the program as compared to other workshop topics (range of mean differences = 0.12–0.21) and those limited increases were typically less than the increases observed in other workshops. Similarly,

the one-year post-program findings in magnitude and significance of increased use of best practices were lower among the workshops on elder mistreatment, ethics, and supervisory leadership in interdisciplinary practice (range of mean differences = 0.06–0.14).

By the same token, the workshops on *Teaching Gerontological Social Work Assessment Skills* and *Measuring Outcomes of Gerontological Social Work Practice* had the largest magnitude of positive change in both preliminary and enduring practice changes. A possible explanation is that the participants may have previously lacked familiarity with these subjects either through professional training or work experience. Overall, these findings suggest the reassessment of the particular supervisory best practices found in the SLA curriculum for content, conceptual clarity, and practice relevance. The findings are also relevant to faculty in undergraduate and graduate social work degree programs who may consider the value of teaching additional competencies in gerontological assessment, measurement of practice outcomes, and supervisory skills.

Indicators of relevant professional experiences, including years since completing the MSW degree and years of work as a supervisor, are notably different among low and high users of best practices. As shown in Table 2, low users of best practices, comprising 89% of the sample, were working as supervisors for more than 6 fewer years on average than high users of supervisory best practices. This finding likely suggests that the program attracted far more supervisors who were less experienced in social work and supervision than the high-users of best practices.

While the increases in the use of best practices were significant and noteworthy among all of the participants characterized as pre-program “low users” of these supervisory skills, among the “high users” it was found that small to moderate decreases in the use of best practices were discovered in five of the workshops at both Times 2 and 3. One possible explanation for patterns of variation in practice change by pre-program rates of use of best practices is that the low users were, by definition, rarely using the best practices of relevance to these workshops and therefore had considerable room for gains during their time in the program. Similarly, those who were consistently using these best practices prior to the program had little room for improvement and so would not be expected to realize sizable increases in the frequency of their use.

We can further speculate that high users may not have fully understood the best practices defined in the measurement instrument and their initial baseline measures (Time 1) may have offered over-inflated self-assessments of the frequency of use of such supervisory practices. Once these participants spent a number of hours learning about these particular best practices from expert instructors and peers, their subsequent self-assessments were lower but potentially more accurate. These concerns justify the addition of retrospective pretests at post-program measurement periods in future evaluations to determine, for example, if participants who initially reported routine use of best practices would later reduce their self-assessment of pre-program supervisory practices once those practices are better understood.

Limitations

As a program evaluation study lacking randomization of participant assignment as well as a lack of comparison or control groups, the findings of this study are limited in terms of generalizability to the larger community of similar social work supervisors who might

enlist in the SLA program or similar programs. Lacking the resources to determine the impact over time in terms of staff retention and services to clients, this study evaluated participants' self-assessment of their frequency of use of best practices as articulated in the program's curriculum. Such self-assessment relies upon participants' understanding of the concepts and language in each item. Yet, the measurement instrument used in this study, the Practice Inventory for Supervisors in Aging Services, is unvalidated and non-standardized. While the scholars involved in this study are working to complete measurement validation at the time of this publication, the lack of validation and standardization for this measure limits the applicability of this study in allowing for comparisons to other similar studies. Additionally, the best practices which framed the SLA workshops were constructed by the project team and vetted by program instructors and Advisory Board members. These supervisory practices were not previously tested for relevance, applicability, or conceptual clarity. Such testing is recommended and may lead to the further establishment of a verified set of competencies for social work supervisors.

The measurement instrument instructions guide respondents to consider their recent work as a supervisor over the past 3 months and to rate each of the supervisory practices as something they have done "Very Often, Often, Rarely, or Not At All." These response anchors were not defined on the instrument but rather left to the interpretation of the respondents. This approach relies on subjective interpretation of the response options and limits the generalizability of study findings.

It is also important to note that in the analysis, high users were defined as those who report that their use of best practices was often (3) and very often (4), which in many cases, resulted in uneven cell sizes in the two groups. While it is numerically more advantageous to lower the cutoff in order to have more balanced numbers in both groups, doing so would be less meaningful for differentiating who on average used best practices often or very often. The objective of this study was to determine within-group differences as a result of participation in the workshops. The results shown in [Table 4](#) indicate that within-group differences in best practice use over time were more pronounced for the low user group when higher users were excluded. This finding strengthens the impact of this program in effecting practice change for participants in Supervisory Leaders in Aging.

Lastly, it is possible that there may be some social desirability in findings from this study. However, the surveys in this continuing education program were confidential and had no bearing on their employment. Therefore, there is little to no incentive to report more favorable results.

Conclusions

Supervisory Leaders in Aging is a professional development program for social work supervisors working in settings that serve older adults and their families. The program under the auspices of the National Association of Social Workers delivers a series of continuing education workshops over a period of 3 months. Learners convene for intensive and interactive experiences including small-group learning activities in which they are challenged to examine and practice the skills needed to use relevant best

practices in their work as supervisors, with time to test those skills in their real work between workshops. This study demonstrates the effectiveness of the SLA program and curriculum in achieving its intended outcome of increasing the use of best practices among supervisors. The program fosters the adoption and maintenance of best practices for this audience, and it is recommended that social work supervisors enroll in similar programs in order to increase knowledge and skills for high-quality supervision of direct service workers who provide care for older adults. Continued development and testing of the SLA curriculum and its interactional, small-group educational model are justified and the expansion of the program into new locations is warranted.

Following the completion in 2018 of the SLA program that featured small group in-person workshops, NASW converted the program to a fee-based online webinar series. However, the educational model on which this study was based was adopted by the continuing education departments of four schools of social work in New York State at Adelphi, Buffalo, and Syracuse Universities as well as at the University of Connecticut. Entitled Social Work Practice Fellows (SWPF), the program is coordinated by the Adelphi University Center for Nonprofit Leadership and has now completed three cycles of training. Plans are underway for the expansion of SWPF in other states.

Statistical and analytical approaches used in this study included setting more conservative thresholds for significance due to multiple comparisons and accounting for pre-program variance in levels of relevant competencies. Such approaches are not only appropriate for this particular study but are also recommended as essential components of measuring changes in practice that may result from professional education and training programs. Continuing education is required for licensed practice in many fields with the purpose of impacting competencies through improved knowledge and skill. Measuring resulting and enduring changes in practice is a logical complement to measuring immediate gains in knowledge.

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Ethics

This non-interventional study did not require institutional review or approval by an ethics committee. This study's findings are based on anonymized data collected from the evaluation a continuing education program. Evaluation procedures were explained in writing to participants in advance of data collection, including the voluntary nature of participation.

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