



University of
Pittsburgh®

School of Social Work

PhD Students on the Job Market

FALL 2026



PhD Students

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A Message from the Doctoral Program Director

SARA GOODKIND

Dear colleagues,

As University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work PhD Program Director, I am proud to introduce our Fall 2026 PhD candidates who are entering the job market.

Pitt School of Social Work is committed to our mission of preparing courageous leaders to transform social work practice, policy, research, and education. We develop scholars who conduct critical, rigorous, and boundary-pushing research that is grounded in community and lived experience, challenges oppressive systems, advances just policies and practice, and contributes to collective well-being. Our faculty and students develop collaborative partnerships to understand, prevent, and ameliorate complex social problems, as well as to promote thriving individuals, families, and communities. The school's vision statement to transform — our world, our future, ourselves — cannot be accomplished without centering anti-racism as an essential and non-negotiable commitment for our school, and our doctoral students embody that commitment.

The four students featured here would be a strong addition to any institution's research, teaching, community engagement, and social justice work.

We hope you reach out with any questions, and please be sure to visit us at CSWE and SSWR to meet our candidates and learn more about our PhD program.

Sara Goodkind, PhD Program Director

University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work



Daniel Kwasi Abusuampek

Email: dka18@pitt.edu

Webpage for Daniel Kwasi Abusuampek

Research Interests:

- Tribalism, equity consciousness, and intergroup conflict
- Mental health disparities and the social determinants of health
- Community-engaged research and program evaluation
- Global and international social work
- African diaspora studies and history
- Documentary filmmaking as public scholarship

Dissertation Title:

Why “Us vs. Them” and Not “Me and You”? Exploring the Impact of Tribalism on Our Mental Health: A Case Study in Pittsburgh, PA

Daniel Kwasi Abusuampek is a social work scholar, educator, and community-engaged mixed methods researcher who studies poverty, how group division shapes mental health and community well-being. Born in Ghana and trained in both African and American institutions, he examines tribalism, the “us vs. them” thinking that turns difference into exclusion, as a public health problem in the United States and Ghana.

His dissertation uses an explanatory sequential mixed methods design, and he is versed in instrument development through scale construction and psychometric evaluation. He builds and manages REDCap systems for survey administration, works in R and Stata for survey design and analysis, and uses Atlas.ti for interviewing, thematic analysis, and narrative inquiry. As Research Coordinator on a funded project of a cognitive behavioral intervention, he manages protocol, recruitment, and pre- and post-intervention measurement across cohorts. He also conducts community-engaged program evaluation and serves as a researcher on NIH R01 and PCORI funded projects.

In 2023 he founded the African Tribe Bridge Institute, delivering training in Pittsburgh and Accra with over \$45,000 grant funds, and produced two documentary films, *Understanding Tribalism (Us vs. Them)* and *Decolonizing Our Thinking*, that carry research to public audiences.

Before his doctorate, Daniel spent more than a decade expanding access to education in Ghana, co-founding a nonprofit that built three schools serving over 5,000 students, and taught for three years at the University of Ghana. He teaches undergraduate research and community practice at Pitt’s School of Social Work, supervises MSW practicum students, and mentors international graduate students.

Dissertation Committee:

Kyaïen Conner, PhD, LSW, MPH (Chair)

Dean, Professor, and Donald M. Henderson Endowed Chair;
Executive Director, Center on Race and Social Problems,
School of Social Work, University of Pittsburgh

Mary Elizabeth Rauktis, PhD

Research Associate Professor, School of Social Work,
University of Pittsburgh

Yodit Betru, DSW, LCSW

Director, MSW Program, Clinical Associate Professor,
School of Social Work, University of Pittsburgh

Dianxu Ren, PhD

Professor of Biostatistics; Director, Statistical and
Data Support Services, School of Public Health,
University of Pittsburgh

Sitao Chen

Email: sitaochen@pitt.edu

Webpage for Sitao Chen



Research Interests:

- Child welfare workforce development and well-being
- Competency-based training
- Secondary trauma
- Culturally inclusive mindfulness-based intervention
- Policy and program evaluation
- International social work practice

Dissertation Title:

Developing a Culturally Inclusive Mindful Self-compassion Intervention for Social Work Students

Sitao's research sits at the intersection of workforce well-being, community-engaged intervention, and the evolving demands placed on child welfare professionals and social workers. Her mixed-methods dissertation invites social work students to co-design a culturally inclusive mindfulness curriculum addressing stress and secondary trauma, aiming to provide sustainable supports to students and reframe self-care as a matter of collective responsibility rather than individual burden. Her additional projects focus on workforce assessments, evaluation of AI's impact on practice and competencies, and the intersectionality of identity, household responsibilities, and wellbeing among professionals.

This research agenda is grounded in her experience working with professionals and children in rural China, where she evaluated local workforce structures and competencies, contributed to training guides, and conducted research that informed national policy development. These experiences, combined with sustained collaboration with child welfare professionals in the U.S., shape her understanding of how professional wellbeing is influenced by policy, organizational structure, and cultural context, and continue to drive her commitment to community-partnered scholarship that improves practice.

Sitao is also passionate about teaching. Having served as a teaching assistant and currently teaching independently, she is dedicated to helping students see the real-world impact of their learning. Through a dynamic, student-driven process that connects theory with lived experiences and diverse forms of knowledge, she is committed to preparing students to critically evaluate evidence, navigate diverse perspectives, and contribute to social justice at every scale.

Dissertation Committee:

Marlo A. Perry (Chair), PhD, MS.Ed.

Research Associate Professor; Director of Research and Evaluation, Child Welfare Education and Research Programs, School of Social Work, University of Pittsburgh

Shaun M. Eack, PhD, MSW

Professor, James and Noel Browne Endowed Chair, School of Social Work; Professor, Department of Psychiatry, University of Pittsburgh

Mary Elizabeth Rautkis, PhD, MSW

Research Associate Professor, School of Social Work, University of Pittsburgh

Jessica Griffin Burke, PhD, MHS

Professor, Department of Behavioral & Community Health Sciences, School of Public Health; Associate Vice Chancellor for Global Affairs, Health Sciences, University of Pittsburgh



Latrice Shannon

Email: las470@pitt.edu

Webpage for Latrice Shannon

Research Interests:

- Poverty
- Poverty-Aware Paradigm for Social Work Practice
- Critical social work
- Child welfare
- Social and economic mobility for Black Americans

Dissertation Title:

From Reporting to Supporting: Promoting Child Welfare without the System

Latrice Shannon, MSSW, focuses her scholarship on improving material and social conditions for marginalized families. Her dissertation utilizes mixed methods to examine mandated reporters' attitudes and beliefs about poverty and the factors that affect their decisions about child welfare reporting. Reporting families to the system has not only failed to adequately detect or prevent child maltreatment but has also failed to improve material conditions for families affected by poverty on a wide scale—most of whom are children of color. By educating mandated reporters to employ critical practice, we can disrupt the structural forces that perpetuate the cycle of racialized poverty. Her study focuses on a training for mandated reporters created through community-led advocacy efforts in Allegheny County, Pennsylvania.

Latrice's research interests stem from her personal experiences as a Black American woman who grew up in a household affected by poverty as well as from her 20+ years of experience in practice (pre- and post-MSW) as a mandated reporter. Her long-term goal is to integrate poverty awareness into social work education and practice and evaluate its effects. Poverty awareness requires social workers to stand by their clients and to use structural approaches to alleviate poverty. Importantly, it provides a blueprint for aligning our practice more closely with our values.

Latrice's extensive post-MSW practice experience has afforded her the opportunity to independently teach direct practice courses. She values the sharing of social and cultural capital to make higher education and research more accessible to Black and first-generation students.

Dissertation Committee:

Sara Goodkind (Chair), PhD, MSW

Philip Hallen Chair in Community Health and Social Justice, PhD Program Director, University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work

Victor Jr. Figueroa, Ph.D., LCSW, LICSW

Assistant Professor, School of Social Work

Kyaïen Conner, PhD, LSW, MPH

Dean, Professor, and Donald M. Henderson Endowed Chair; Executive Director, Center on Race and Social Problems, School of Social Work, University of Pittsburgh

Darcey H. Merritt, PhD, MSW

Professor, The University of Chicago Crown Family School of Social Work, Policy and Practice

Max J. Vicente

Email: cjv33@pitt.edu

Webpage for Max J. Vicente



Research Interests:

- Sense of belonging and self-esteem in students
- Formerly incarcerated and justice-involved college students
- Recidivism, employment, higher education
- Abolitionist framing and critical race theory
- Qualitative research and public scholarship

Dissertation Title:

Conviction to Convocation: Sense of Belonging & Self-Esteem in Formerly Incarcerated College Students

Max J. Vicente, MSW is a PhD candidate in the School of Social Work at the University of Pittsburgh. Max's qualitative research focuses on both sense of belonging and self-esteem among formerly incarcerated college students from around the country. Their dissertation utilizes an inductive approach and abolitionist lens to center the lived/living experiences of justice-impacted college students as they navigate large tethered systems. Max's scholarship explores mechanisms through which augmented feelings of belonging and self-esteem serve as facilitators to the successful pursuit of secondary education, while simultaneously contributing to the development of identity.

Qualitative inquiry that centers formerly incarcerated students is astonishingly rare on its own; Max's dissertation is exceedingly novel given the researcher's own history of incarceration and commitment synthesizing that experience as part of the concluding discussion. Rather than it being a methodological risk, Max views this shared experience as a strength of the study, and how it underpins their perspective on carcerality + higher education. In future scholarship, they expect to contribute to abolitionist perspectives in higher education and social work education.

Max is interested in a faculty position at a teaching-first school of social work, as their greatest joy is in the classroom. Max TA'ed within the Department of Gender, Sexuality, and Women's Studies for two undergraduate sections of Sex and Sexualities. Within Pitt's SSW, Max has taught two masters-level courses: Mental Health & Public Policy for DP students; Human Behavior in the Urban Environment for COSA students. This Fall, Max will teach Diverse Populations for first year MSW students. Outside of the academy, Max instructed a writing course for incarcerated students at SCI Greene.

Dissertation Committee:

Victor J. Figueroa, PhD, LCSW (Chair)

Assistant Professor, University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work

James Huguley, Ed.D

Associate Professor, University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work

Jeffrey Shook, PhD

Professor, University of Pittsburgh School of Social Work

Hayley Weddle, PhD

Assistant Professor, Educational Foundations, Organizations, and Policy, University of Pittsburgh School of Education



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2117 Cathedral of Learning
4200 Fifth Avenue
Pittsburgh, PA 15260

socialwork.pitt.edu



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The School of Social Work is also a member of the International Association of Schools of Social Work (IASSW).