

Diana Garland, social work educator & bridge builder, dies

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WACO—Diana Richmond Garland, founding dean of [Baylor University's school of social work](#) that now bears her name, died September 21.

Garland, 65, trained generations of Christian social workers to express their faith through ministry to people Jesus called “the least” among society. She championed the skills and principles of social work within congregations and faith-based ministries. And she demonstrated the value of Christian ministry to the secular social work community.

Led the Carver School

Garland began her educational ministry in 1979, when she joined the faculty of the [Carver School of Church Social Work](#) at Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Ky. She eventually led the Carver School as dean and directed its Center for Family Ministries.



Diana Garland (Photo:

Baylor Magazine) Her career and ministry seemed to stumble in 1995, when

the seminary's young president, Al Mohler, declared, "The culture of social work and the culture of theological education are not congruent."

He blocked tenure to social work faculty and vetoed her nomination to fill a professorship. When Garland contended the president's actions made hiring faculty impossible and imperiled the Carver School's accreditation, he fired her for insubordination.

Move to Baylor

But Baylor hired Garland to join its social work faculty in 1997. The university also hired her husband, David Garland, a New Testament professor, to join the faculty of its [Truett Theological Seminary](#).

Under Diana Garland's leadership, Baylor expanded its social work program. And when the university created its School of Social Work in 2005, she became the founding dean.

David Garland became Truett Seminary's fourth dean in 2007. He also served as Baylor's interim president from 2008 to 2010 and was its interim provost during the 2014-15 academic year.

"I hired Diana Garland to help us move the Baylor undergraduate social work program to a full-service (offering bachelor's, master's and doctor's degrees), nationally recognized school of social work," recalled Preston Dyer, then director of Baylor's social work division and now professor emeritus in the Diana R. Garland School of Social Work.

From ideas to action

Garland succeeded Dyer as Baylor's social work director and then became dean when the social work school opened. The school met its initial goals in 2013, when it admitted its first Ph.D. cohort, Dyer noted.

"I've known many people who had a new idea a minute, but few who had

the ability to put those ideas into action,” he said. “Diana had so many good ideas that sometimes, I got a headache just hearing them. But she was one of the few who could take an idea and carry it to fulfillment.”

Rooted in faith

Garland succeeded and stood out in her profession because her “contributions to social work really begin in the church,” explained Jon Singletary, her longtime faculty colleague, protégé and current interim dean of the Garland School.

“Her contributions to serving others always have been rooted in her faith,” he said. For example, Baylor offers a dual-degree program featuring master’s degrees from both the Garland School and Truett Seminary. He also cited the school’s close relationships with and internships rooted in congregations and Christian service ministries.

“It’s amazing to see the role of faith come alive in social work because of who she is and what she has done,” Singletary said.

Changed conventional wisdom in social work

The list that describes “what she has done,” not only is long but also deeply significant, Garland’s colleagues and admirers said.

Garland changed conventional wisdom about the relationship between faith and social work, noted Helen Harris, an assistant professor of social work who started teaching at Baylor the same year Garland did.

“When I went to graduate school, we were taught social work and anything about religion and spirituality must be kept completely separate. In fact, to do otherwise would be unethical,” Harris explained. “That was the prevailing thought in the profession in the ’70s and ’80s.

“But Diana knew that wasn’t true. She knew people are whole, and

anything about them matters. ... She sees spirituality as a source of strength, but it can be a source of real challenge and pain as well.

“One of her key contributions has been helping us understand the experience of church and God and religious belief sometimes is a source of great strength and sometimes a source of pain. Clients need support in making sense of the pain in their lives.”

Integrating faith and professionalism

“Diana epitomizes a Christian social worker who intuitively understood how the expression of Christian faith through social work strengthens and contributes to both the ministry of the church and the profession of social work,” added Rick Chamiec-Case, executive director of the [North American Association of Christians in Social Work](#) and a longtime collaborator with Garland. Garland served that organization as a board member, president and author.

“Diana created a synergy that adds to both—as opposed to some in the profession and some in the church who have said, ‘You have to pick one or the other.’ She showed that’s not true,” he said. “She demonstrated how to ethically integrate faith and the practice of social work.”

Building bridges

Throughout the social work profession, Garland was renowned for building bridges, Chamiec-Case reported.

“She created respect for churches among social workers and also enabled the churches to see the value of providing social work,” he explained. “When the (social work) profession needed a boost from the faith community, they turned to her.”

So, Garland demonstrated the church and social work “are not mutually

exclusive,” Harris said. “The church has been an important helper from the beginning of time—and certainly from the beginning of social welfare.

“Diana understood the church is the context of (social work) practice. The church has a lot to offer widows, orphans, families and ‘lepers’—whoever are marginalized and feared. The church of Jesus Christ is ready to step in the gap and say, ‘You are worthy of love, no matter what,’ and bring professional care. But Diana wasn’t willing to leave that to the profession. It must be central to the work and practice of the church.”

Modeling caring relationships

Garland also made a dramatic impact upon church social work by raising Baylor’s program so far so fast—and by modeling caring relationships and emphasizing God’s individual calling, her colleagues noted.

“Baylor’s School of Social Work made the (nation’s) top 100 schools of social work in five years, which is absolutely amazing,” Dyer said, noting the field includes more than 400 schools.

“It’s basically a reputational evaluation; it’s just what people think,” he said. “To create a reputation in five years is amazing, and I’m basically convinced it was Diana’s reputation we were evaluated on. She made an unbelievable presence wherever she was.”

Impact on countless lives

That presence shaped the students, faculty and staff at the Garland School of Social Work, Singletary added.

“So many of us have benefited in innumerable ways from knowing Diana,” he said. “Most of my professional career has been sitting at her feet. She has been my mentor for almost 15 years, and I love the way she taught and shaped me. And it’s not just me. It’s so many faculty, students and alumni.

So many professionals in the community and around the state have been touched by her life.”

Garland illustrated the ideal of excellent teaching and academic research and writing, Singletary said.

“One of the unique things about Diana’s legacy is the way her dynamic personality is as vibrant in the classroom as it is in what she writes,” he observed. “Her books are truly the stories of her life and the stories of the families she’s gotten to know and the students she’s taught over the years. That’s a great example of Christian social work teaching and research that we all hope to live up to.”

Other Christian schools sought to emulate the pattern Garland laid at Baylor, Chamiec-Case said. “She was a wonderful teacher to other schools of social work,” he explained. “She taught them how to set up their programs and how to pursue accreditation. It’s something that was very new and novel when she did it at Baylor, and now many have followed.”

Growth and development

That pattern has been remarkable. In 1999, when Baylor’s social work division became its own department, 101 students were enrolled, according to figures compiled by Nikki Wilmoth, the Garland School’s director of marketing and communication.

From that year to 2005, Baylor granted 168 bachelor of social work degrees and 98 master of social work degrees. And since the School of Social Work opened in 2005, Baylor has granted an additional 584 master’s degrees and 384 bachelor’s degrees in social work. The university will grant its first Ph.D. in social work soon, when the first doctoral cohort finishes its program.

In addition, Garland raised more than \$7 million in research and program

grants since she joined the Baylor faculty.

Garland has written, co-written or edited 19 books and more than 120 professional articles.

Lasting legacy

Garland's legacy will remain for generations, her colleagues predicted.

"Diana, as much as anybody I've ever met, sees the strengths and potential for change and difference-making in students," Harris said. "She seeks out the faith and stories of students and calls them to understand their calling and to live into that vocationally."

"That was her modeling for the rest of us. Her work gets multiplied in every faculty member and every staff member. ... The importance of that vision is not dependent upon the physical presence of the visionary. So, while we really miss her, the vision lives and will continue to live."

"I'm excited to think about the future of the school because of the legacy she has added for us," Singletary noted. "The school, being named in her honor, is not just a picture of our past, but a vision of who we will continue to be as we keep her vision alive in our own teaching and research."

Garland is survived by her husband of 45 years; a daughter, Sarah, a journalist and author, and her husband, Matthew Sweeney, also a journalist and author; a son, John, a pastor and middle-school teacher, and his wife, Abby, a high school principal; three granddaughters, Aurora Grace, Azalea Faith and Tess Moran; and grandson Matthew Edward.