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International Social Work Leader Review

Alberto Godenzi (1952–2019)

“Visionary Leader and Strategic Thinker”

**Prepared by Patricia Welch Saleeby, PhD, MSSA
Department of Sociology, Criminology, and Social Work
Bradley University**

Biography

Dr. Alberto Godenzi was a visionary leader and strategic thinker well known for his promotion of globalization in higher education and his long-term advocacy efforts against violence toward women and children. For decades, he advocated for social workers to become globally literate indicating the need for three essential skills including global awareness, versatility with language, and cultural humility. He was named as one of the most influential social workers based on merit, scholastic study, and political activism in 2014. As described by Boston College President Reverend William P. Leahy, S.J., Dr. Godenzi was considered “a man of action and relentless energy who was just and caring and had a deep sense of mission and a commitment to education” (Smith, 2019).

Born on December 26, 1952 in Basel, Switzerland, Dr. Godenzi was an accomplished scholar. He graduated from the University of Zurich, the top institution in Switzerland with a master’s degree in psychology and sociology. He later earned a doctorate degree in social psychology from the same institution. And he received a master’s in business administration (MBA) from the Open University in the United Kingdom.



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Dr. Godenzi held an initial academic appointment as professor and director of social work and social policy at the University of Fribourg in Switzerland. Additionally, he served as an associate scholar in social psychology at the University of Zurich and worked in the Department of Child and Juvenile Psychology at the University of Bern. Later, he joined the University of New Hampshire in the Sociology Department, and he worked as an international research associate at the university's Family Research Laboratory.

In 2001, he joined Boston College as the dean of the School of Social Work. Under his leadership, the School of Social Work was elevated in the national rankings to one of the top schools in the country. Committed to global social work, diversity, and innovation, Dr. Godenzi launched multiple programs to address key social issues including the Center for Social Innovation, Immigrant Integration Lab, Global Practice Program, and Latinx Leadership Initiative. These new initiatives helped the school gain widespread prestige, as summarized in the following:

“During the 15 years Dr. Godenzi served as its dean, the BC School of Social Work achieved international prominence, rising to 10th in the *U.S. News* rankings of social work schools and programs. Applications for the BCSSW Master's Degree in Social Work program rose from 400 to 1,200, and the school's AHANA representation increased from 10 percent to 40 percent. The school simultaneously attracted a national pool of top graduate students for its MSW and PhD programs. In addition, faculty publications rose steadily, and research funding quadrupled.” (BC News, 2019)

After a few years assuming the dean position, Boston College became a leader in the area of aging and the workplace for social work educators. The Center on Aging and



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Work was established in 2005 to promote choice, opportunity, and quality of work (paid and unpaid) across the lifespan focusing on older adults. Then in 2013, Boston College became one of the first Hartford Academic Centers of Excellence in Geriatric Social Work along with the University of Michigan that was funded by the Hartford Foundation and the Gerontological Society of America.

During 2016–2019 Dr. Godenzi served as the Vice Provost for Global Engagement and Professor of Global Practice at Boston College. Through this position over 3 years, he expanded and enhanced international partnerships, promoted the inclusion of international faculty and students, and increased support for study abroad programs. His emphasis on global engagement is present in his following statement reported in the *Boston College Chronicle* (2018),

“Boston College has evolved from a local to a national to an international university. Today, many of our faculty are engaged in global activities, and the number of international students is at a new high. Moreover, we have a strong global base of loyal alumni. A strategic and coordinated approach to global engagement will allow us to be more intentional and more effective in our international endeavors. This in return will increase opportunities for students, faculty, staff, and alumni.”

In terms of scholarship, Dr. Godenzi published numerous journal articles and books in several languages. His primary research interest and area of expertise was the prevention and consequences of violence against women and children. As reflected in the words of Carrie Yodanis, one of his former students and co-researchers, "Through his research and teaching, Alberto Godenzi dedicated his work to reducing violence against women and building a more equitable, safe, and peaceful world." Even in his research, he utilized a global approach to understanding and addressing critical social



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issues. One key example was his highly regarded study that systematically examined program interventions to child and wife abuse across countries including the United States, Canada, and France.

Additionally, he presented at countless national and international conferences. This included multiple keynote addresses like his speech, “Men and Violence: The Logic of Inequality,” for the international seminar promoting equality sponsored by the Council of Europe. Over the years, he spoke at various schools of social work emphasizing the need for globalization in social work education and identifying the need for unity among social work professional organizations. In fact, he and Dr. Kay Hoffman were instrumental in securing funding to support a Wingspread meeting of key social work organizations in 2007 to discuss the future of social work. This call for action was initiated at the NASW 50th Anniversary and Social Work Congress in 2005, which brought together prominent social work leaders to strategize around a common agenda for the profession.

Dr. Godenzi addressed these social concerns through his research but also by engaging in professional and community service. While serving in leadership at Boston College, he accepted an appointment to the Board of Directors for Venice International University in 2017. He served on the Council of Europe’s Group of Specialists for Combating Violence Against Women for many years. In his local community, he helped to establish a hotline with trained counselors to deal with cases of child sexual abuse.

“As social work professionals, we have learned competencies that enable us to initiate and sustain change in the lives of vulnerable populations throughout the world. Our skills set is a privilege and a responsibility. We cannot sit idly by when poverty, disease, inequality, and injustices undercut families’ and communities’ potential to survive and thrive.” (Godenzi, Fall 2009)



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Dr. Godenzi's dedication to the profession was certainly demonstrated through his dedicated years of service in social work organizations. He was a member of the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) Board of Directors and the Society for Social Work and Research. He served as the Secretary General of the International Consortium for Social Development, and President of the National Association of Deans and Directors of Schools of Social Work (NADD). While he as president, NADD created a Global Commission for Social Work Education. As one of the Founding Board members and editor of the *Encyclopedia of Social Work*, he commissioned numerous entries on topics relevant to social work. He also chaired the National Search Committee for CSWE in 2011–2012 that led to the appointment of the first CSWE president, a title change that replaced Executive Director with the retirement of Dr. Julia Watkins.

In closing, the school's current dean, Dr. Gautam Yadama, provided these remarks:

“The strong foundation for global practice and domestic social work laid by Dr. Godenzi has been central to our current strategic directions. The school has expanded its global impact in sub-Saharan Africa, South Asia, and Latin America while doubling our commitment to the Latinx Leadership Initiative and the Black Leadership Initiative. Alberto Godenzi's legacy continues at the Boston College School of Social Work.”

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