

**Expectations for Portland State University's School of Social Work**

**Submitted by the Students of Color Caucus**

**Presented to the School of Social Work on May 12th, 2017**

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There is much evidence to corroborate the fact that the faculty and administrative team at Portland State University's School of Social Work has, on several occasions and spanning many years, failed to address and properly acknowledge the experience that students from targeted communities have had in this program. In listening sessions hosted by administration intermittently throughout the past two years, students from targeted communities have consistently expressed hurt and trauma caused by faculty and staff, damaging curricula, unchallenged microaggressions in the classroom, and the overall centering of whiteness, heteropatriarchy, and adherence to capitalist norms implicit in the school's culture. After sharing our very painful experiences, we are ready to see a change in actions and new policy implementations to properly address the issues and concerns we have expressed. The systemic issues that fuel injustice, which the School of Social Work professes to have a vested interest in dismantling, are in fact alive and well in our program. The time has long passed to move beyond the "listening" stage. We have heard about the Strategic Plan, and we have read emails aiming to calm our anger and redirect our trauma. Students from targeted communities have made their voices loud and clear, and are now listening for your response, ready to witness and experience actual change. We expect the School of Social Work to act on what it professes to be and to cultivate: agents of change.

Hindering this change is a palpable culture in the School of Social Work of dismissing students, their concerns, and their trauma. Last year (2016), the MSW listserv was emailed audio and video recordings of key members of the administration engaging in this belittling of

students. This culture is shaming, destructive to the work we are all attempting to do, and it is unacceptable. As a field inundated by secondary trauma, compassion fatigue, and burnout, it is the responsibility of the School of Social Work to avoid contributing to the emotional suffering of social work practitioners because it is the responsibility of the School of Social Work to produce graduates who are competent and capable of serving their communities well.

The School of Social Work ought not be comfortable hiding behind the structure and tradition of the academy when hearing our stories and our input. Being openly critical of the structure of the School of Social Work, university, and other institutional and governmental systems is an important way of showing solidarity with students experiencing institutional racism, heterosexism, cissexism, transmisogyny, classism, sizeism, misogyny, ableism, judeo-christian normativity, and other forms of oppression. This is important as it benefits not only students who are targeted by institutional oppression, but models to all students how to live and practice the social justice ideals the PSU SSW claims to espouse. It is the duty of the School of Social Work to influence the culture of this university to be more equitable and inclusive for all students. Furthermore, PSU and its foundation are not to be plundered in an effort to expedite the gentrification of an already troubled city, but to consistently and conscientiously support its students. The sociopolitical climate of Portland in 2017 is such that students entering the School of Social Work at the CFS, BSW, MSW and PhD level believe the SSW's claims about social justice and seeking equity, and feel they are being misled once they observe the organizational and classroom culture firsthand. The School of Social Work exploits student labor intellectually, in the context of field placements, through research, and in class projects, using our labor to elevate the status of the school and solicit funding. It is expected that, in return for this, the

School of Social Work at the very least would listen to and adjust its practice to center on the voices of students.

The School of Social Work prides itself on being socially just, yet there is a significant disconnect in the message it sends to the students from both targeted and privileged communities within the program. The disconnect continues, most significantly, in the oppressive actions that occur within the School of Social Work that do not align with the school's proclaimed values, CSWE Core Competencies (most notably Competency 4), or the NASW Code Of Ethics (see standards 1.05, 4.02, 6.01, and 6.04). It is time that the school releases itself from the white supremacist and oppressive foundation from which it often operates. Provided below is a list of expectations for the administrators, faculty, staff, and students of the School of Social Work, intended to foster a more inclusive, culturally humble, and a braver space in which to grow and develop practice skills.

*Acronyms:* PSU: Portland State University

SSW: School of Social Work

CSWE: Council on Social Work Education

NASW: National Association of Social Workers

LGBTQ2S+: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, Queer, Two-Spirit and other identities

## **Expectations**

The expectations outlined below are part of a living document, representing the beginning of an ongoing partnership in which SSW stakeholders demonstrate a system of consistent and sustainable accountability. Action items were developed communally by over thirty students and staff over the course of a year, with the expectation that any corresponding actions in response to these expectations are to be developed in community as well.

### **Section I: Letter of Acknowledgment and Action Proposal**

We expect an official acknowledgement of wrongdoing and a subsequent plan of action.

- a. Publically acknowledge, in writing, the damage to students of color and all systemically targeted students and communities caused by the SSW.
- b. Acknowledge all of the students who come from intersections of historically targeted identities that have been dismissed from the program or have dropped out due to institutional barriers, harassment, discrimination, and/or the resulting retaliation for speaking up against injustices. These students hold identities that include but are not limited to; poor and working class, sick and/or disabled, Queer/LGBTQ2S+, gender nonconforming students, parents, students of color, and those that sit at multiple intersections of those identities.
- c. Provide a publicly available written timeline that outlines the School of Social Work's plan to ensure that these issues are addressed in proactive fashion.
- d. Announce that the School of Social Work will no longer say it is a program focused on "social justice," but rather "working actively toward the liberation of all oppressed peoples."

### **Section II: Organizational Structure**

We expect an SSW program whose very structure is designed to challenge oppressive organizational norms and practices.

- a. Hire, tenure, and retain more faculty and staff of color, Queer/LGBTQ2S+ and gender nonconforming faculty and staff, faculty and staff with disabilities, international and

multilingual faculty and staff, faculty and staff whose lived experiences reflect those of the communities we serve, and those that sit at multiple intersections of those identities. To retain employees from targeted communities, the implicit culture of the School of Social Work must be transformed. Not only must you hire and tenure more faculty and staff of color, but work to cultivate an environment in which professionals of color are likely to remain.

- b. Hire and support faculty who have a critical, culturally grounded praxis and who speak out and work to dismantle the systems of oppression that operate within the administration. This includes faculty that have worked in the community from the grassroots level of organizing to challenge oppressive systems and structures.
- c. Acknowledge and cease the exploitation of adjunct faculty, who are not being adequately compensated for the wealth of labor and experience they contribute to the School of Social Work, and are put in the vulnerable position of being less able to advocate for their own needs and the needs of students.
- d. Amend admissions criteria to give appropriate attention to lived experiences as indicators of one's ability to apply culturally humble and inclusive social work practice. Current models facilitate a practice of institutional gatekeeping that bars members of targeted communities from serving those communities by earning a degree in Social Work.
- e. Amend admissions criteria to differentiate between students who demonstrate familiarity with the *jargon* of social justice and students who demonstrate an ability to meaningfully *engage* in social justice work.
- f. Strengthen the accountability of instructors by enacting policies around inclusion, as evidenced by classroom observation and performance evaluation.
- g. Provide paid time for faculty prior to and throughout the term to adjust curricula and materials to be responsive to the students they are instructing.
- h. Include within the spectrum of "acceptable" transferable credits coursework that has helped students to develop culturally responsive pedagogy and practices.
- i. Provide a paid student staff position that is in charge of being the bridge between the School of Social Work as an institution and students from targeted communities.

### **Section III: Organizational Culture**

We expect an SSW program whose organizational culture is one in which stakeholders from targeted communities are supported and valued.

- a. Invite students from targeted communities to participate and collaborate in decision-making processes, including when hiring new faculty and staff. Make student participation a meaningful aspect of decision-making, and provide equitable honoraria to account for specialized student labor (physical, emotional, and intellectual).
- b. Develop an explicit plan for retaining employees from targeted communities, including consistent methods for seeking and documenting feedback from faculty and staff who hold these identities, in order to create and maintain a culture in which these professionals feel supported and valued.
- c. Develop a set of explicit action steps for staff, faculty, and students who commit acts of discrimination, to ensure that all stakeholders in the SSW are held accountable.
- d. Develop consistent transparency around the process for filing and documenting grievances.
- e. Formally recognize, learn from, and provide incentives for faculty and staff who are already using culturally responsive practices and values.
- f. Publish on the website any committee positions that faculty/staff hold to demonstrate transparency.
- g. Develop and maintain a diverse alumni network in order to foster student connections with the broader community.
- h. Apply a critical lens to the vendors that the SSW uses, and commit to an explicit and documented preference for supporting community businesses owned by people of color, Queer/LGBTQ2S+ and gender nonconforming community members, people with disabilities, and businesses with a documented history of anti-oppressive practices.



#### **Section IV: Curriculum and Pedagogy**

We expect to have professors and staff that can practice and teach culturally affirmative and anti-oppressive social work values.

- a. Require professors to adopt Trauma Informed Oregon's tips for creating and practicing a trauma informed classroom.
- b. Prioritize the need to teach in a way that is designed for the intellectual advancement of all students, not just white, cisgender, male, heterosexual, U.S.-born, temporarily able-bodied students.
- c. Require curriculum writing teams to design assignments through the lens of different positionalities, learning styles, and “ways of knowing.” Deconstruct and challenge the colonization of knowledge in the academy, which values scientific method and the illusion of objectivity over experience, intuition, and ancestral knowledge.
- d. Strengthen the process for curriculum review to ensure a system of checks and balances against the introduction of potentially problematic materials.
- e. Require instructors to assess their content via an intersectional lens. We are much more in the world than just students of color: we hold multiple identities that inform how we experience racial oppression. There is more to us than our trauma histories, which are currently exploited within the SSW curricula as fodder for intellectual dissection.
- f. Develop a culture of sharing within the SSW faculty of effective, culturally affirmative classroom practice, techniques, and assessments.
- g. Add to every syllabus a written statement verbalizing a commitment to culturally responsive curriculum and pedagogy as well as a commitment to upholding trauma-informed and equitable spaces.

#### **Section V: Professional Development**

We expect a community of faculty and staff who engage consistently in ongoing learning, and whose advancement is based on a multitude of factors beyond research pursuits.

- a. Supply ongoing mandatory trainings for all staff and faculty centered in addressing equity issues, microaggressions, ableism, white and heteronormative guilt and fragility, and

oppressive behaviors and structures that occur in and outside of the classroom. This includes the use of counter-narratives that challenge current deficit-based models, as well as explicit instruction around resistance movements within targeted communities, thereby challenging the narrative of the “white, middle class, cisgender, heterosexual, able bodied social worker as savior.”

- b. These trainings must be provided by members of targeted communities. It is not ethical to consistently pay white consultants to speak to the experiences of people of color.

### **Section VI: The Field Program**

We expect a Field Program that is designed to enrich the learning of all students and refrains from capitalizing upon the exploitation of student labor.

- a. Vet field placements so that they are affirming and anti-oppressive for students of from targeted communities, recognizing the heavy burden in requiring students to pay thousands of dollars to perform labor, and that this requirement of unpaid/pay-to-play labor is a serious bar to economically strained students and vastly privileges those who can afford to do this.
- b. Develop a plan of action to prevent oppressive placements from being used in the SSW, and ensure that placements that are identified as oppressive or otherwise problematic are removed from the school's field placement pool.
- c. Secure students’ permission to place them in culturally and/or racially specific agencies before doing so. Avoid making assumptions about the identities that students hold as placements are considered.

### **Section VII: The Strategic Plan**

We expect the following to be included in the School of Social Work's Strategic Plan:

- a. Hire an official equity officer within the program. A Student Support and Inclusion Specialist can only be truly effective with an institutional commitment to corresponding systemic change.
- b. Create an explicit plan for the retention and recruitment of students and faculty/staff of color, Queer/LGBTQ2S+ and gender nonconforming students and faculty/staff, first generation and low-income students (and those that sit at multiple intersections of those

identities), international students, multilingual students, and students and faculty/staff with disabilities.

- c. Provide consistent support and resources for international and multilingual students. Develop and seek out scholarships to reflect a greater need for immigrant and refugee voices within SSW classrooms.
- d. Adopt the equity measures of PSU's Strategic Plan into the SSW's Strategic Plan, with explicit action steps on the part of the School of Social Work in order to ensure congruence with the university's vision.

