



A Conversation on Creating Trans-Affirming Social Work Field Placements

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[Editor's Note: This issue's Conversation features an interview by Diane Zipoli, MSW, Assistant Director of Field Education at Simmons University School of Social Work, with two colleagues and a current student from the School of Social Work at the University of North Carolina, Chapel Hill: Rebecca Brigham, MSW, Assistant Dean of Field Education; Robin Sansing, MSW, Field Faculty; and Raye Dooley, MPH, MSW Candidate (2019). The exchange is about an online training they developed on Trans-Affirming Field Placements that can be accessed at <https://ssw.unc.edu/sswevents/online>. In order to take the course, individuals must be registered on this site and create a username and password. Once registered, click on the Field Education tab to view the course. After each module, participants will be asked to complete a short evaluation. Once all evaluations are completed, the participant will receive a certificate of completion documenting contact hours.]



Rebecca Brigham, MSW



Raye Dooley, MPH, MSW Candidate



Robin Sansing, MSW



Diane Zipoli, MSW

Diane Zipoli: First, let me thank all of you for making the time to speak with me today. We're excited to learn more about the much-needed training that you've authored, creating trans-affirming field placements for social work students. When Simmons University School of Social Work faculty members saw this training posted on the CSWE Listserv, we shared it with our field liaisons. We're now eager to share it more widely.

To start the conversation, I'm curious to know if there was a particular situation - or moment - that prompted the creation of the training?

Rebecca Brigham: There were a series of moments, maybe each of us can chime in here from our respective perspectives. A couple years ago, at the beginning of the academic year, we had several trans and non-binary identified students come to us to share that they did not feel safe or affirmed in their field settings. There were a range of experiences from misgendering, incorrect use of pronouns, and a general lack of understanding on the part of field instructors and agency staff about what it means to have a trans or non-binary identity. These serious infractions were tremendously hurtful and harmful to these students. Honestly, we realized that we had a very serious situation that needed to be addressed. Agencies that we thought would be affirming, those chosen for that very reason, turned out not to have the awareness or ability to work with students with these identities.

After much conversation about interventions that would be more or less effective, we decided that we wanted a tool that we could use as a strategy for both prevention and intervention with field instructors and agency staff. Our thought was to create a training that we would distribute regularly and often, that it would be a part of our expected delivery of training for all new field instructors, and reminding field instructors and agency staff of its availability on a regular basis. We also wanted the tool to be readily available for use when our students experience transphobia. In summary, our plan was to use it as a way to engage field instructors and agency staff, offering a learning opportunity that would motivate our colleagues to provide safe and affirming placements for our students.

Diane Zipoli: How did you all come together to make that happen?

Raye Dooley: I was actually in one of the field placements that turned out to be an unsafe and painful environment. In collaboration with some other non-binary and trans students at the School, we had conversations with the field department about what could be done, for the immediate remedy of our situations, and for the benefit of future students.

Raye Dooley: It was our hope to create systems and structures that would be in place to prevent this from happening. And, if it were to happen, we wanted to create a systematic way to respond. We also identified a set of values to help us more readily identify the kinds of environments and behaviors that were, and were not, acceptable. We were in ongoing communication with the field program about our thoughts throughout this process. Then, as part of some funding that I had received through the School, I needed to complete 10 hours of community service. I approached Rebecca and said, “I have these 10 hours that I will be using to do something for the School, and I want it to be in service of trans students.”

I asked how we could use this time to address some of the issues that had been coming up during the year, with the understanding that nothing that we could do would solve the whole problem. It felt symbolically important to at least take a first step and get the conversation rolling. I’ll let Rebecca and Robin speak a little bit to how that conversation resulted in this specific training, but that’s the context in which we started to come together.

Robin Sansing: I also want to add that Raye did a fantastic job of bringing together trans students, folks in the community, and allies, in a summit where we had pretty much a day-long discussion about some of the issues that were arising, and some ways that we could start to address them. It was so exciting.

As for the training, I feel like much of it came out of a realization that, “Okay, we clearly need to be supporting our field instructors and field faculty, what are some of the ways that we can do that?” Raye took the ball, ran with it, and created this fantastic training that we now are able to share nationally. Rebecca, being so wise, was successful in finding a way to make it free of charge and accessible to everyone.

It feels like a huge part of our work, not only with our trans and non-binary students, but with the community at large, was to help bring people up to speed. I imagine there are a lot of field departments, similar to ours, that would think this shouldn’t be a big deal because we’re all social workers and we know how to support people from lots of different communities. We found, however, that our colleagues were not as ready for this as they might have thought.

Diane Zipoli: I understand this came out of a collaboration with students, and as a result of witnessing, first-hand, that training sites were not where you wanted them to be on this issue. I’m wondering if you engaged any partner agencies in the development (or piloting) of the training, or if Raye took the lead in getting the content together.

Rebecca Brigham: Yes, and yes. The summit that we had in the spring before Raye began their work was a pivotal event. We needed to come together as a community to talk about strategies that we could use to eliminate the transphobia that our students were experiencing. During that summit, we invited three or four field instructors to come and speak about what would be helpful to them as it related to their intersecting identities. I don't remember, Robin, if we had a field instructor pilot it.

Robin Sansing: We did. I did some interviews with field instructors to get feedback about their needs. Once that was done, we had some field instructors in the group that took a first look at the training. They gave us helpful feedback that we incorporated into the training. Raye, do you want to add anything?

Raye Dooley: In this case, we didn't have the advantage of being able to refer to peer-reviewed literature for best practices. So, as part of the summit, we invited participants, including field instructors, to help the School engage in a values clarification. That exercise informed everything that went into the training.

Diane Zipoli: That's helpful, Raye. Thank you. I know it's still early, but I'm wondering what the response has been from students, from agencies, and from field instructors.

Robin Sansing: That's a great question. I'm curious to hear from Raye about the student response. I can talk about the responses we're getting online. Is there any word amongst the students about this, Raye?

Raye Dooley: A little bit. I have less contact with the students who would have taken it in their first year, but others have shared that they found it to be a generally helpful grounding tool, one that provides a baseline level of knowledge about non-binary and trans identities.

Robin Sansing: That's great.

Diane Zipoli: Raye, just to clarify, did you indicate that all first-year students are required to take the training?

Raye Dooley: Yes. It's my understanding that they are required to take it as part of their field seminar.

Diane Zipoli: And you were going to add some other findings, Robin?

Robin Sansing: Yes. The responses from the online training have been overwhelmingly positive. We have had about 500 people complete the training to date, which is extraordinary. It's been nationally available for only about a month. It has really taken off! One exciting outcome is that people are sharing it with their agency staff. We're actually reaching a larger community than we expected. We hoped that it would spread, but we are amazed at the response. And, many who work in agencies are sharing painful experiences that parallel that of our students.

Rebecca Brigham: I had a field instructor call me in disbelief, not only that the training existed, but that it was free and could be taken at any time! She asked, "Can I give the link to those in my unit who don't have students?" I said, "Absolutely!" She continued with, "Can the doctors do the training?" I said, "Yes, of course, it's free to all!"

Everyone is invited. That's the intention. It is free and available to anyone in the world. That was so important to us. We developed it for our field instructors, but we thought it was such a terrific tool that it needed to be shared. In my networking with other field directors across the country, it was clear how much my colleagues also needed this tool.

Diane Zipoli: It sounds like your hopes have been exceeded. You've reached into organizations and agencies, helping to promote a culture shift. You're enhancing the understanding of those who work with students *and* with clients – that's wonderful!

Rebecca Brigham: That's exactly right.

Diane Zipoli: Talk about having an impact! I know that we have been very excited about that. It's helpful to know that the training is not just intended for field instructors but for students, agency staff, other disciplines, and as you said: anyone.

Rebecca Brigham: We built this into our field seminar for our first-year students. We also purchased pronoun buttons for them, not only for their use in agencies, but to take to their field instructors as an additional way to engage them post-training.

Diane Zipoli: That's fabulous! Are you doing a formal evaluation for the project?

Rebecca Brigham: Yes, there's an evaluation tool at the end of the training.

Robin Sansing: We're collecting that data and have submitted a proposal to CSWE for the Annual Program Meeting to update our social work peers about this work and learn how we can continue to improve upon it.

Diane Zipoli: Raye, I'm wondering how you went about creating the content for this. Did you have a hard time figuring out what to include, or did that just fall into place naturally?

Raye Dooley: Ultimately, it took much more than 10 hours. Those hours barely covered the time needed to put the summit together. Then the School was able to secure a little more funding for me to work over the summer to put the training together. You might have noticed that the training is broken up into two modules. Originally, we had envisioned it as one. As I started getting into it and realized what content was essential, it became bigger and bigger and could have been even bigger than it ultimately was.

Diane Zipoli: This is such a great model of communication between students and a field office, and an example of what can happen when people come together in response to such needs. It sounds like the summit was extremely significant in terms of developing relationships between students, faculty, and agencies.

Rebecca Brigham: We make it all sound very happy and nice, but I want to say that it was also hard. I think we need to articulate that and recognize all of the pain and hurt for many that brought us to this effort. We had students who experienced harm in the field. We also had field faculty who were trying to do the right thing, but not always understanding and listening carefully enough to the students' experiences. We also had community members who were outraged by the experiences that some of our students endured. While I would never minimize anyone's experience, I do think it brought us to a more reparative place.

Diane Zipoli: Well put, Rebecca. Were there any surprises along the way, or things that you might suggest if other schools or students were to take on a project or training of this magnitude?

Raye Dooley: One thing that all of us in this room experienced was the rapid evolution of the framework through which we consider gender. We would create training content, and a month later it would be obsolete. That was a challenge. We learned it is perhaps most important to create a framework of values that can inform us how to navigate these situations using critical thinking, social work values, and social justice ethos, rather than developing a set of rules that include what responses are right.

Diane Zipoli: That's so helpful.

Rebecca Brigham: I would add that it's not enough for allies to attempt to do this on their own. I think that's true for any training about marginalized people. I wouldn't even begin to do this without the help of people who carry trans and/or non-binary identities to help us and check us. That's one.

The second thing I would say is that while the feedback has been largely positive, we have also received some input suggesting that we should be developing similar trainings for other marginalized and oppressed people who are engaged in field education. I think this is a very important and justifiable piece of feedback. Field programs, if they're going to do this work, need to think about this both narrowly and broadly.

Raye Dooley: The values and ethics that underlie trans liberation would also underlie anti-racism work, work that deconstructs ableism, and more. In fact, this framework could apply to most marginalized identities.

Diane Zipoli: Well put. Is there anything else that you would want our readers to know about your work on creating trans-affirming field placements?

Rebecca Brigham: This has to be one prong of a multi-pronged effort. I don't think it's enough to complete a training, and say, "We did it, we're good." There are other ways that we're trying to infuse this content and this perspective with our students. For some time, we have had an assessment tool used to assess whether agencies could provide affirming field placements for students who identify as LGBTQI. What we realized about that assessment instrument is that it is primarily focused on the L, the G, and the B, and not trans and non-binary identities.

We're modifying that tool now so that we can get better data and regularly track where our agencies are in their ability to provide safe and affirming field placements. We also recognize that it is a process, and that we need to afford them the opportunity to grow.

Diane Zipoli: It's a starting place.

Rebecca Brigham: Yes it is.

Raye Dooley: I want to highlight the amount of work and collaboration that went into this, and also reiterate Rebecca's previous point that, while we're talking about a training here, this training is reflecting people's lived human experiences. I don't want that to be missed. It feels important to note that some of the more invisible labor came from trans and queer community members.

Diane Zipoli: Wonderful. Thank you, Raye, and thank you everyone. We will include the link to your training here, in the hopes that we can play some part in getting this out to as many colleagues as we can.

Rebecca Brigham: Thank you, Diane, very, very much for the chance to share this important experience.

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