

May 6, 2010

Dear Dean Videka, Dean Noonan, and esteemed faculty:

Following several months of town hall meetings discussing the state of racial diversity issues at the Silver School of Social Work, approximately 30 students gathered to create a proposal for change to address the concerns raised at these meetings. Many students shared very personal and moving narratives regarding their experiences in the classroom, in interaction with faculty, and in their field placements. Students of color, often one of very few in the classroom, spoke about being forced to “educate” their peers and professors, and being expected to take a spokesperson role to “represent” their racial group. These students noted that the curriculum and class content seemed aimed solely at the White majority, at the expense of these students’ education. White students shared frustrations regarding the School’s ability to fully educate them as future social workers, given such a lack of focus on diversity and social justice issues. In working with communities of color, White students reported that they were not taught about these populations, save for case examples given during examinations that tended to pathologize the subjects.

It became clear at these meetings that the current state of the School is not tenable for providing a non-hostile space for students of color and a complete educational experience for all students. It is integral to the School’s mission of “educat[ing] professionals for the pursuit of social justice” (New York University Silver School of Social Work, 2009) to make issues of racial justice a common theme throughout the program - in our classrooms, curriculum, and community. This mission must be reflected in the culture of the School, namely in the course content, faculty representation, and student body. In the attempt to truly promote social justice and to deconstruct the forces of oppression, our school should aim to reflect the populations served by the profession of social work.

Our desire for change is not a fleeting request, but an argument grounded in social work ethics and scholarship. According to the NASW Code of Ethics (2008), one of the ethical principles of our profession is social justice. The Code explains that this principle prescribes “activities [that] seek to promote sensitivity to and knowledge about oppression and cultural and ethnic diversity” (p.1). The discussions we heard from the town hall meetings made it clear that this focus was not being fully met, or at the very least, not consistently emphasized across courses and instructors.

In seeing each classroom as a group, one can use the analogy of group psychotherapy to explore the risks of not addressing racial diversity issues, or of not doing so effectively. Smith and Shin (2008) write about the impact on those members (or students) who belong to a dominant group:

Ineffectively addressing issues of privilege and oppression has larger consequences than just a stalled group. The most benign outcome is that the dominant group members lose out on an opportunity to develop empathy for marginalized individuals and groups in society...Perhaps the most harmful outcome in a group where the facilitator is unaware and/or unable to acknowledge issues of social privilege is the reinforcement and normalizing of oppressive attitudes and behaviors, allowing the dominant group members to walk away from the group counseling experience with a protected sense of innocence and a lack of culpability for their participation in our system of power and privilege, based on socially constructed categories. (p. 360)

The authors also elucidate the risk of not addressing these issues, or solely pathologizing the experience of minorities, on members of minority groups. In this example, they speak about an

individual's gay identity in the context of a heterosexist world. It is logical to presume that the same would apply to a person of color in a White-dominant, racist world:

focusing only on the client's inadequate gay identity development and/or expecting him to teach the other members what it's like to be gay may actually result in the client being oppressed in the very group that is supposed to provide healing. (p. 360).

Student testimonials during the town hall process revealed that both of these phenomena are occurring in our classrooms: students of color are asked to educate their instructors and peers, and all students are only presented with the negative aspects of the minority experience. In our program, a forum in which students are to be taught how to effectively fight for social justice and deconstruct patterns of oppression, many of those same students are at risk of being further oppressed themselves.

On an interpersonal level, one can see how experiences like those described by students in the town hall meetings and echoed by Smith and Shin (2008) can amount to daily microaggressions. Miller and Garran (2008) define racial microaggressions as "verbal and nonverbal put-downs and social assaults that wound people of color unbeknownst to the perpetrator" (p. 97). As Smith and Shin (2008) point out, the oppression that results from privilege is not overt. Therefore, examples of these microaggressions can be seen in our very school: an entire class looks to the one student of color so speak 'on behalf' of his or her race; an instructor leaves the responsibility of educating on this topic to the students of color; a class curriculum is taught while taking for granted that the social worker in question will be White. These daily occurrences amount to an environment that is actively hostile towards students of color.

Remaining unaware of privilege in the classroom is also dangerous since, unless thoroughly examined, students will likely transport this privilege, and all the unchecked classroom experiences that further reinforce it, into their work with clients. Perez Foster (1998) illustrates four different ways this unrealized and unexplored privilege can affect one's clinical work, a phenomenon she calls "cultural countertransference." Without fully exploring one's identity, a social worker is liable to use their American values, euro-centric theoretical models and group biases in ways that may be harmful to their clients and cause premature termination of services. As an institution of clinical social work, it is the duty and obligation of the School to train their students in a model that counteracts this tendency.

It is for these personal, professional, and ethical reasons that we come to you with the enclosed proposal. We have included a short video of student testimonials, as we feel that direct student experiences may be helpful for faculty who did not attend the town hall meetings. We hope to work with the administration to implement a plan that will address the needs of the students and faculty alike, and that will enable the Silver School to truly become an institution of social change and social justice. We hope to receive a response from the faculty and administration within the next month, and look forward to meeting with you then to discuss the ideas suggested. As a point of contact, please feel free to email Maryam Toloui at [REDACTED], or call at [REDACTED]. We would like to take this opportunity to thank you for your cooperation and enthusiasm thus far in the process. We are excited to continue this work together.

Respectfully yours,

The Racial Diversity Town Hall Coalition

Racial Diversity Student Proposal

May 1, 2010

I. Enhancing the Diversity of the Student Body

1. ***Increase scholarship funds for people of color to increase student accessibility to SSSW***
 - a. Increase scholarship funds for students of color
2. ***Allocate more funding and resources to the recruitment of students of color***
 - a. Allocate more funds to the recruitment efforts needed to reach students of color
 - b. Renew recruitment efforts in the tri-state area to take advantage of the existing diversity of our community
3. ***Begin to emphasize social justice during the application process***
 - a. Add a question to the Silver School MSW application addressing the role the applicant could play within the larger framework of promoting social justice and change. Similar to “How do you see your role as a social worker in resolving issues related to social and economic injustice and discrimination based on race, gender, sexual orientation, religion, etc.” (San Diego State University Masters of Social Work application; April, 2010)
4. ***Investigate best practices***
 - a. Conduct research into how other universities are able to recruit students of color, including how they are funding recruitment and scholarship efforts

II. Faculty Topics

1. ***Focus on the hiring and retention of faculty of color***
 - a. Make racial diversity a priority in hiring of new faculty
 - b. Focus efforts on retaining faculty of color already employed by SSSW by offering tenure to eligible instructors
2. ***Focus on a general shift toward social justice in the faculty***
 - a. Emphasize the hiring of full-time, part-time, and adjunct faculty whose scholarship focuses on issues of diversity and work with marginalized populations and communities
3. ***Prioritize racial diversity training in the professional development of faculty members***
 - a. Mandate ongoing diversity training for all faculty members focused on a self-reflective exploration of power and privilege, including training on both the needed content and process topics that should be addressed in the classroom

III. School Culture

1. *Emphasize the importance of racial diversity issues by incorporating trainings and workshops into the MSW curriculum*

- a. Incorporate a small-group, experiential, racial diversity training on power, privilege, and oppression with a focus on self-reflection for all students. These workshops should be provided during every:
 1. new student orientation
 2. professional development day

2. *Prepare new students for discussing social justice issues*

- a. Add summer readings addressing power, privilege, and oppression and use them as a foundation for beginning class discussions
- b. Incorporate this conversation during the new student orientation

IV. General Curriculum

1. *Every class should properly address race and power*

- a. Re-examine the syllabus of every course to ensure that these issues are being incorporated in the entire curriculum, not just portioned off as one lesson/one week
- b. Ensure that relevant readings are required, not merely suggested, and by all professors teaching the course
- c. Mandatory training for all faculty on issues of race and power in addition to facilitation techniques for leading these discussions in class
- d. Examine how intersectionality influences ALL curriculum content, including HB, Practice, Policy, Ethno, Research, and electives.

2. *Add more content reflecting the contributions of people of color and by authors of color*

- a. Add readings reflecting the experience of people of color currently working in the field of social work
- b. Include the contributions of social workers of color to the discussion of the history of the profession

3. *Provide a more complete picture of populations of color by avoiding pathologizing*

- a. Incorporate readings showcasing successful models of people of color as opposed to only using materials that portray people of color in need of help
- b. In order to help change the tone established thus far, incorporate assignments focusing on other populations (i.e. rural White individuals etc.) in need of help as well

4. *Consider expanding the offered electives*

- a. Add more mini and elective courses addressing previous and current issues relating to marginalized populations (i.e. a course focusing on women of color)

V. Improving the Ethnocultural Course

1. ***Providing our Ethno professors with the necessary tools to succeed***
 - a. Mandate extra training for ethno professors on content and process
 - b. Ethno professors should receive ongoing significant and meaningful training throughout the year
 - c. The content of this training will be established by the Taskforce and the ethno committee

2. ***A change to the course title***
 - a. The Ethnocultural Issues course title should be modified and/or broadened to encompass the pertinent concepts of power and privilege.

3. ***Addressing the format of topics presented in Ethno***
 - a. Course should be arranged in such a way that avoids addressing only one “minority” per week as in some classes, this has resulted in a sense of tokenism
 - b. The focus should be on intersectionality, power and privilege and how different groups fall into this
 - c. Consider arranging the ethno curriculum to focus on different theories (i.e. Queer Theory, Post-Colonialism, Critical Race Theory, Social Constructionism) while making sure to avoid tokenism and include the historical process of the theories
 - d. Infuse experiential learning including literature with personal narratives, expanding class discussions, and incorporating student narrative along with the theories.
 - e. Promote students to infuse what they are learning about power and privilege into their practice while taking responsibility for how the students are propagating this information in the field

4. ***Improving the Ethno Class Evaluations to better reflect the work being done in the course***
 - a. Mid-semester evaluations – format to be determined by the Taskforce (either in the form of sporadic drop-in appearances by the taskforce, or surveys established by the taskforce to enforce accountability)
 - b. In order to properly evaluate the professors the Taskforce will re-evaluate the content and appropriateness of the standing evaluations

VI. Diversity Task Force

1. ***Create a Diversity Task Force in order to focus on issues of racial diversity at the School***

2. ***Purpose***
 - a. The Task Force is charged with enacting this proposal
 - b. The Task Force is charged with the ongoing evaluation of racial diversity topics at the School by:
 - i. Hosting one Town Hall meeting per semester to gauge the student experience
 - ii. Meeting every three weeks to ensure productiveness
 - iii. Providing drop-in hours
 - c. The Task Force will be an ongoing School committee to ensure longevity
 - d. The Task Force will undergo annual self-evaluations to ensure effectiveness

3. *Composition*

- a. The Task Force will include three faculty members
 - i. At a minimum, one will be an administrator and one will be tenured. Overlap between roles is allowed.
 - ii. Faculty members will be nominated (by students, colleagues, or by self-nomination), and chosen for participation by the student members of the Task Force
- b. The Task Force will include seven students
 - i. One student will be appointed by each of the following student groups: The Graduate Student Association (GSA), The Student of Color Collective (SOCC), Unity through Multicultural Education (U+ME), and Pride in Practice (PIP)
 - ii. One second-year student and two first-year students will be chosen directly by the Task Force
- c. At a minimum 50% of the Task Force members will be people of color
- d. All Task Force members will have attended a training focused on oppression and privilege (e.g. Undoing Racism, etc.)

References

- Miller, J., & Garran, A.M. (2008). *Racism in the United States: Implications for the helping professions*. Belmont, CA: Thomson Brooks/Cole.
- National Association of Social Workers (2008). *Code of Ethics of the National Association of Social Workers*. Retrieved May 1, 2010 from <http://www.socialworkers.org/pubs/code/code.asp>.
- New York University Silver School of Social Work (2009). *Mission Statement*. Retrieved May 1, 2010 from <http://www.nyu.edu/socialwork/about>.
- Perez Foster, R. (1998). The clinician's cultural countertransference: The psychodynamics of culturally competent practice. *Clinical Social Work Journal*, 26(3), 253-270.
- Smith, L. C., & Shin, R. Q. (2008). Social privilege, social justice, and group counseling: An inquiry. *The Journal for Specialists in Group Work*, 33(4), 351-366.