

# Faculty *focus*

*Highlighting innovation in teaching at UM-Flint*

## **Engaged:**

## **Student-Driven Learning in Social Work**

by David Linden

At the close of the Winter 2015 semester, students, faculty, and administration from the University of Michigan-Flint gathered in the Michigan Rooms for “An Evening of Excellence in Social Work.” The event featured posters and presentations by graduating Social Work majors who were showcasing their semester-long projects. The celebration served as the culmination of the seniors’ hard work invested in the department’s capstone, SWR 490, Integrated Seminar in Social Work Leadership, recently revamped as a *structured student-driven community engaged* course.

The course overhaul is the brainchild of Dr. Jessica Camp, Assistant Professor and Research Lead for UM-Flint’s Social Work Department. When Camp was handed the reigns for the capstone course, she found herself in the fortuitous position to “start from scratch,” as the department was seeking to make strategic curricular changes. Having “been interested in having students drive learning and exploring opportunities to have them do that,” Camp determined to shift the weight of the course from professor-driven to student-driven.

Camp alludes the model is an adaptation from secondary education and a departure from similar post-secondary selections. Asked if she’s familiar with other universities or colleagues in the field

blazing a similar trail, Camp responds “not really; I read a lot about it and saw some high schools doing it so I thought, ‘why can’t it be transferred to college?’” Prepared to be an agent of transfer, Camp drafted a proposal for the course redesign and timeline while pursuing administrative and financial support, which included a Faculty Development Teaching Grant from the TCLT. With Department Chair backing, local community partners, volunteer support, and material resources in hand, Camp met her timeline and launched the new capstone in January 2015.

Camp was strategic in conceptualizing the new teaching philosophy for the course, and its three driving components—*student-driven*, *community engaged*, and *structured*—are easily recognizable in her course explanation. Motivated by the overarching question of “How do we create lasting change and not simply offer charity (which is helpful but doesn’t challenge the structure of inequality)?” students handpick and launch

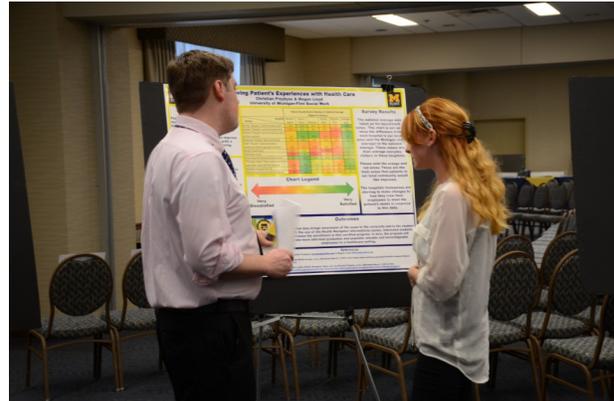


*Jessica Camp*  
Assistant Professor  
Social Work

projects targeted to engage a specific Flint-community need, determine the projected outcomes, and evaluate project success based on those projections. Structurally, Camp requires that projects and plans are: approved by Camp in advance to confirm they're "deliberate and doable;" semester-bound to ensure they're "current and relevant;" and tackled in teams, since project scopes are too difficult to carry out individually. Besides, Camp adds, "real-world social work is accomplished in unity and community."

Camp acknowledges inherent risks for the student-driven model, namely ambition and time management. During the project design phase Camp is readily prepared to balance "reigning-in students versus inspiring them to do more." More often than not, the former is the case. Their "over-the-top zeal for social work," Camp laughs, translates into students dreaming up ambitious projects accompanied by a highly enthusiastic spirit to get them under way. What's more, this may be students' first experience staging and managing a months-long project. To offset these potential trappings, sequencing "benchmarks" are built into each plan to help keep teams on task; this allows Camp to conduct regular "check-ins" with groups to strategize and re-focus plans as necessary.

Camp is confident the benefits of the structured student-driven community engagement model far outweigh the risks. Stemming from their aforementioned zeal, the capstone affords students an outlet to "turn passions into real change." Camp



*"Evening of Excellence in Social Work" presentations  
April 29, 2015*

explains that UM-Flint Social Work juniors and seniors in the Social Work Block of courses have already been engaged in cross-curriculum work and are jointly enrolled in an internship alongside their capstone. By the time they arrive to SWR 490, many students have been drawn to arenas and issues where they'd like to affect change. Camp's pleased that "[SWR] 490 provides an outlet to launch an idea that's already percolating." Linking this student passion to the student-driven mission, she adds, "This course gives students the capacity to ask and address *any question* while they still have faculty and the resources of the University supporting them, "why would we stand in their way?"

Reiterating the "current and relevant" criteria for the semester projects, Camp equally mentions the value of establishing direct ties to local community. Camp mentions that every UM-Flint social-worker-to-be is challenged to think "glocally," tabbing projects with global implications to be carried out with local impact. This on-the-ground focus requires students to seek out and develop relationships and partnerships in the immediate community. Through these connections future social



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workers establish relationships that can be maintained when they venture into the field professionally.

The field work attached to a personal vision further benefits students as they learn how to navigate and overcome project barriers throughout the term. Some barriers arrive through external forces of time and space and authority. Regarding time, Camp expounds that some projects merely lay a foundation, passing the baton to capstone successors or the partnering organization. For some projects, physical space becomes a challenge, as facilities are limited in allocating square footage to house services and resources. Other teams wrestle to maintain ownership of their vision. Camp recalls one project was essentially “taken over and distorted” by outside influences, leading one student-team to reassess the project and their roles in it. Camp accepts that some projects may not meet the exact goals set at semester’s start. This, too, is a “benefit.” In real-world social work, not every vision or project can be implemented exactly as designed, so students profit from “learning about and

being equipped for failure, and adapting to pull together successful projects in spite of barriers.” Camp ensures students have no misconceptions: whether logistical, structural, or political, there will be walls to climb—and these walls forge the flexibility, innovation, and problem-solving required by every practicing social worker.

Camp makes no apology for the rigorous nature and aggressive scope of the course. Convinced the new course structure well-equips students with preparedness beyond the classroom, Camp justifies, “They’re expected to do this [social work] the moment they walk out the door.” TCLT Director Tracy Wacker agrees with Camp’s assessment of the course and its goals: “The term ‘capstone’ implies a culminating experience that requires students to integrate and apply what they’ve learned in their academic careers,” she contends. “SWR 490 fits this description perfectly through several high impact practices such as collaborative assignments, diversity/global learning, and community-based learning.” Considering the energy and time investment required of students beyond the classroom, the course remodel included a petition to re-designate the course from 3 credit to 4 credit status. Camp stresses in non-negotiable fashion, “It’s a challenging course; it *should* be 4 credits.” Asked if the adjustment is yet approved, Camp smiles. “Done,” she replies with satisfaction; “the course change will be active for the 2017 cohort of social work seniors.”

Under current semester rhythms, SWR 490 is a winter semester offering, and Camp remains the sole instructor. Based on the

assorted Lead specializations in the Social Work Department and time constraints the course requires, it will remain that way for the near future. Camp recognizes the once-a-year frequency may need to be revisited. She documents that Social Work is one of the top 8 rapidly growing fields in the U.S. and the number of Social Work graduates at UM-Flint has more than doubled from 34 to 71 during Camp's tenure. Camp supposes course facilitation will eventually be shared should the department hire more faculty in the future, but she believes it would be unfair to ask new or non-full-time faculty to take on the expansive challenge. For now, Camp is content to oversee the capstone as implemented.

Early returns on course success are immensely positive. Camp concedes the course was "not without its hiccups," but she's thrilled with the inaugural run, which exceeded her expectations. Community and university response continues to be equally supportive and involved. Camp reports that some agencies have already contacted her about future partnerships, and many who took part in the "Evening of Excellence" have inquired when the next one will be. Camp further mentions that recent Social Work alumni and presenters in the initial celebration look forward to returning to encourage their capstone successors and future Social Work colleagues. Wacker, who was in attendance, understands why. "The Social Work Evening of Excellence was designed for the students to present their projects in a symposium fashion," she expounds; "*But it was much more than that*; the students were graduating seniors whose families,

friends, colleagues and faculty attended to honor them as they embark on a new journey upon graduation. It was an energetic, emotional experience that exemplifies the power of well-designed courses and well-designed events to remind our students of how far they have come, how far they have to go, and how much we at UM-Flint appreciate their hard work and dedication."

The second annual "Evening of Excellence" is scheduled for Wednesday, April- 20, 2016, in UM-Flint's Michigan Rooms. "The public can't wait," she says with anticipation. Judging from her excited tone, neither can Camp.

## *Evening of Excellence in Social Work*

*April 20, 2016  
5:00-7:30 pm*

*Michigan Rooms, UCEN*

Written by **David Linden**

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