

My work as an advocate and organizer started out of necessity – as a queer high schooler in Nebraska 20 years ago, I had to advocate for my existence. Now, I'm lucky that I get to choose to continue these efforts as a social welfare scholar. As a nonbinary German-American doctoral candidate, my formal work focuses on trans intracommunity support and is driven by social justice values. This statement details both formal and informal ways I have centered social justice throughout my teaching, scholarship, and service.

### Issues of Pedagogy

As it relates to teaching, my social justice centered approach means I amplify marginalized perspectives in course content and problematize oppressive narratives in existing curricula, accounts of history, and our approach to social work practice. On an anonymous evaluation, one student stated, *“I feel that this [history and theory of social work] class, more than any other this quarter, has prepared me to participate in social work with a critically informed eye for promoting social justice and not just social welfare. It told stories which have been erased in mainstream education, and I appreciated the deconstruction of white models of social work practice.”*

I set up expectations from the first day of class around microaggressions, accountability, and not avoiding difficult conversations for the sake of our comfort when we are in a position or identity of power. These expectations are integral to ensuring students typically underrepresented in academic spaces are not only safe and comfortable, but affirmed and celebrated. I model how to hold ourselves and one another accountable and address problematic statements without harming rapport or viewing individuals as “disposable”. To work towards creating change, it is imperative that our students know how to work across differences to achieve a shared goal. Finally, as an openly non-binary and chronically ill instructor, my classes are often overrepresented with queer, trans, and disabled students who have expressed their gratitude for seeing this representation and support in academia. One such student expressed, *“Since my first class with them, Vern has served as a mentor to me....Because of their support, I not only believe in my ability to become a leader in my focus of study, but I know of tangible steps to take that will make these dreams come true.”*

### Issues of Research

My dissertation examines intracommunity support, highlighting it as one response to the systemic oppression faced by trans individuals. Much of the research focusing on trans communities studies mental illness, trauma, homelessness, and medical transition. Though it is important that we have information on these topics, my research focuses on positive aspects of belonging to a trans community with the aim to contribute to the depathologization of trans identities and experiences.

I have also supported three students outside of traditional classroom spaces in their pursuit of understanding and conducting research, all of whom come from underrepresented groups in academia (i.e., BIPOC, trans, disabled). This has taken place through mentorship and regular meetings, but also

through supporting students more formally. I am advising one student as they conduct a qualitative study assessing clinical social workers' attitudes/perceptions of psychedelic-assisted psychotherapy that have traditionally been used among indigenous populations and are now gaining popularity in Western settings. I am supporting another student by bringing them on as a research assistant on a qualitative study examining trans individuals' preferences around demographic data collection in healthcare spaces.

I center ethics and social justice when speaking about and teaching research methods. On an anonymous evaluation, one student shared, *"I love how Vern brought issues of social justice to the forefront during class. It was so important to have discussions like that in a context of research methods and I believe those issues should be coming up in every class given that we are all becoming social workers. I imagine that all of us in the class were able to learn and grow as social workers simply by hearing more about social injustices (especially within the context of research)."* I aim to teach students that research can be a form of resistance and activism, through which we lift up our communities and redistribute power.

## **Issues of Advocacy & Service**

Tangible results of my advocacy work at the University of Washington include an additional all gender bathroom in the Social Work building, update admissions forms across programs (i.e., BASW, MSW, PhD) to include preferred names and pronouns, the School's website including information for incoming trans students, the internal software used to manage practicums no longer sending trans student's legal name to potential practicum sites, and the first campus-wide trans resource fair (which I co-organized). Additionally, I have facilitated both in-person and online workshops for instructors within our school regarding meeting access needs in social work classrooms. My expertise in this matter was leveraged when COVID-19 forced our instructors to quickly shift Spring 2020 quarter classes online--in addition to a workshop and online resources (i.e., best practices, tools/strategies, slidesets), I provided one-on-one consultations to faculty. I have also developed and facilitated workshops regarding trans competency, meeting access needs, and addressing microaggressions in the School of Social Work, in other departments on campus (e.g., School of Environmental & Forest Sciences, Oceanography), and at conferences. Lastly, I have supported the Queer/Trans Group within the School of Social Work and hosted quarterly "trans open office hours" for trans and questioning students.

At a national level, I serve as communications coordinator for the LGBTQ Caucus of Faculty and Students in Social Work. We provide networking, mentorship, and support opportunities for doctoral students and early career faculty through in-person meetings at CSWE and SSWR, are advocating for our flagship journal to shift towards a more inclusive name that reflects its contents, and highlight students on the academic job market each year. Beginning this year, we are also able to provide several small scholarships to graduate students attending the CSWE and SSWR conferences.

As a social welfare scholar, I aim to bolster and propagate ongoing efforts within trans communities as we work alongside other targeted communities towards our collective ability to survive and thrive while disrupting structural oppression. My commitment to this is reflected in this final quote from a student: *"Having an instructor that I know will stand up for what is right when things are inequitable is important to me, and knowing that Mx. Harner will take the time to help me out when I need someone to speak up for me or help me figure things out means more than I know how to put into words."*