Greetings fellow Students,

Despite the cold, we are excited to be starting a new calendar year here in Philadelphia. We have had some interesting changes and developments in our wonderful program.

First, as most of you know, Melissa Elfons is the newest member of the finance team at 3815 Walnut. She has taken over Shara’s duties since Shara left to be Grants Coordinator at the Department of Psychiatry in the School of Medicine. If you have not already done so, please stop by and say hello to Melissa and let her know that we are excited to work with her.

We’ve also had some changes in DSSC leadership. Marlene has stepped down as a DSSC co-chair and GAPSA representative. Thank you Marlene for your wonderful service! As announced at our last DSSC meeting, Ryan Petros has taken Marlene’s place as DSSC co-chair and Alexandra Schepens and Dan Teglia will represent us at GAPSA. Ryan, Alex, and Dan are already doing splendidly in their responsibilities.

Marlene will not be sitting idle, however. She and Dexia have agreed to help lead a new collaboration the SP2 will be engaging in with SAS and possibly other schools at Penn. SP2 and SAS have received funding through the G12 Synergy Fund to organize student-led research seminars. The idea is to give us and students from other schools a forum to present our original research ideas, get feedback, and network with colleagues from other schools. Dexia and Marlene meet with SAS student leadership in February, so we can expect more details in the future. This sounds like an exciting opportunity and we look forward to seeing how it plays out!

Ryan and I also recently had a meeting with Susan to discuss some of the issues confronting the PhD student community. I wanted to bring up a couple of the things we talked about (we will provide further details in the upcoming DSSC meeting). The first is that, for 2nd year students, fall and spring semesters will now each have two electives (rather than three and then one). The rationale behind this is to accommodate electives that build on each other or are offered in a sequence. The second thing is that Susan explained the process by which she decides to approve professional development fund requests. Her main criteria are 1) That the request is clearly related to professional development (as opposed to academics), and 2) That there isn’t already a way to cover the need by the resources provided by the school. For example, a computer might be approved if it is for working on your dissertation off campus, but usually wouldn’t be approved because the school provides free computer labs. Similarly, a textbook wouldn’t be approved for a class, but it might be approved if you need it for your dissertation.

As always, there will be many opportunities to volunteer and get together this semester. We look forward to seeing all of you at DSSC meetings, Happy Hours, and other events. Have a great semester!

DSSC Co-chairs,

Daniel & Ryan
This week Alexandra Schepens shares her experiences teaching yoga to a group of individuals recently reentering the community from prison.

**Yoga Rage**

Yoga is the rage in the United States . . . at least largely for the middle to upper class. Ever heard of hatha, kundalini, ashtanga, bikram, power, tantra, or vinyasa? Each represents one of the many offshoots of yoga that now populate American gyms and yoga studios, made palatable to an American audience.

Another rage in the United States is incarceration . . . at least largely for impoverished people of color. It is no news that the United States incarcerates more people than any other country. You may ask what the connection is between yoga and mass incarceration? This connection lies in the yoga teachers and practitioners who are now conducting classes in prisons. For example, James Fox, founder and director of the Prison Yoga Project, has been teaching yoga at San Quentin Prison since 2002. The benefits of yoga, including relaxation, increased flexibility, stress relief and improved sleep, may be beneficial to an incarcerated population. While some people in prison have existing substance use and mental health issues, the prison environment of poor nutrition, restricted exercise, poor sleep conditions and constant disempowerment will create stress on the body, potentially exacerbating or creating behavioral health concerns.

This past month, I have had the opportunity to begin teaching weekly yoga classes to people reentering society from prison at the Institute for Community Justice (ICJ). The ICJ is a Philadelphia initiative that supports community led transformative justice. One ICJ program is the Reentry Center, offering services to people reentering the community from prisons, such as support in finding housing, employment, facilitation of family reunions and skill building workshops. They also offer a yoga class.

Through teaching these classes, I hope to gain a better understanding of how yoga can or cannot be helpful to a population that is struggling with a myriad of issues including but not limited to housing, employment, a criminal record, behavioral health issues and re-acclimation to community outside of prison. The classes consist of 10-15 people, only 2 females thus far. Since starting in the beginning of January, I have already learned a few things. Firstly, shavasana (corpse pose) is the most popular pose. Acting like a corpse, one lies on the ground, closes one’s eyes and focuses on relaxing the body and mind. In this pose, snoring abounds. Secondly, I am confronted with the ever-existing conundrum of how to create individual level interventions that can also affect structural challenges. In just the third class this past week, I noticed one of the students was not as engaged as in previous classes. Upon asking him, he noted “it’s all fine and good when I am here in class, but when I leave all the shit still exists.”

-Alexandra Schepens
Tell us about your work in your current position as a Research Assistant Professor at Penn.

My current position as a Research Assistant professor is somewhat different from a traditional tenure track faculty position. As research faculty, I do not have any teaching responsibilities and therefore am engaged exclusively in research activities. Since the majority of the funding for my position is provided through the VA’s National Center on Homelessness Among Veterans, most of the projects in which I am involved are through the Center and are focused on homelessness among veterans. One of the best parts about working at the Center is that it brings together people like myself who are engaged in the research end of things, as well as VA staff who have responsibility for managing the VA’s homeless/housing assistance program portfolio. As a result, I feel like the research we are doing is, on the one hand, informed by the policy and programmatic needs within the VA, and, on the other hand, has a direct application to policy and program decisions. The work is both interesting and enjoyable, and I fortunate enough to work with some incredible people on both the research and program management/policy side of things.

What experiences at Penn have been the most valuable for you – as a student and now in your current position?

As a doctoral student, I felt as though my mentor, Dennis Culhane, and the other faculty members viewed me more as a colleague than as a student. As a result, I was entrusted with key responsibilities in all phases of a number of research projects in which I was involved. While challenging at times, this was ultimately incredibly valuable in terms of helping me to develop as a scholar. While I am still growing in terms of my professional and scholarly competencies, I think (and hope) that my experiences at Penn have set me on a good path.

Some of the things I did outside of the classroom at Penn were also quite valuable. In particular, serving as SP2’s representative to GAPSA for several years and as one of the graduate student representatives to the University’s Graduate Council of the Faculties (the body charged with making decisions about PhD education throughout the university) helped me to learn an incredible amount about how universities work, and the challenges they face. I am sure that I will draw on my experiences as a part of those two bodies throughout the remainder of my career.

What were your key considerations in deciding to continue your work at Penn as a Research Assistant Professor?

When I was fortunate enough to have been offered the position at Penn, the decision to continue on was pretty much a no-brainer. I was not quite sure I wanted to take on a more traditional tenure track position right away, and as I was lucky to work with a great group of people at Penn and the VA as a doctoral student, the opportunity to continue on just seemed like the best of both worlds.

Tell us about your transition from being a graduate student to a research faculty member. What, if anything, has been challenging about this transition?

To a large extent, the day-to-day responsibilities in my current position as a Research Assistant Professor are similar to what I was doing towards the end of my time as a student in the doctoral program. In my current position, I’ve been able to continue to work on a number of projects that I became involved in as a doctoral student. This has helped make the transition a relatively smooth one. That said, as a doctoral student, you have a fairly concrete objective: finishing your dissertation and completing your degree. In my current position, the objectives are a bit more abstract and so it takes some real careful thought to plan out the best course.

Do you have any advice for current SP2 Ph.D. students vis-à-vis the job market and their career prospects and options?

When it comes to things like this, I have always found real value in soliciting the advice of people who I think know me well and have more life experience than I do. The conversations about career decisions that I have had with students who were ahead of me in the PhD program, relatives, professors from my undergraduate days, and others have been really helpful to me. I know that it may sound strange to answer a question asking me for advice by suggesting that folks go ask other people instead, but my experience is that talking to others is reassuring in that it makes you realize that there a number of possible “right” routes to take, which can help relieve some of the pressure around big decisions.
**Publications**


Blank Wilson, A., Draine, J., **Barrenger, S.**, Hadley, T., & Evans, A. (in press). Examining the impact of mental illness and substance use on time until re-incarceration in a county jail. *Administration and Policy in Mental Health and Mental Health Services Research*.


**Conference Presentations**


**Awards and Funding**

**Dexia Kong** (PI) and an interdisciplinary team of researchers from SP2 and the School of Nursing were awarded $10,000 from the New Courtland Center for Transitions and Health for a one-year pilot research project entitled, “Exploring perceptions of dementia and the culturally appropriate services in Asian communities”.

**Liz Noll** was awarded a 2013 grant from the Fahs-Beck Fund for Research and Experimentation to support her dissertation research entitled “Navigating the Discourse of Dependency: Welfare-Reliant Mothers in College.”

**Jeffrey Sharlein** and **Megan Stanton** received the 2012/2013 Chai Doctoral Fellowship Award from the School of Social Policy and Practice, University of Pennsylvania.