Greetings from the DSSC!

Dear friends, colleagues, and classmates,

A special welcome to six new PhD students this year: Megan Farwell, Marquisha Lawrence, Shana Merrill, Peter Simonsson, Melissa Skolnick, and Viviana Wu. They have brought tremendous talent and energy with them, and hopefully everyone will have a chance to meet and interact with them soon. Welcome back to all of the second years as well, and congratulations on successfully passing the preliminary exams.

We want to recognize Femida Handy as the new PhD Program Director. We are very excited to work closely with Femida, and can already tell the great care and concern she has for every PhD student and candidate. We wanted to remind everyone to schedule a one-on-one with Femida, so that she can better get to know you. Congratulations to Dan Treglia for graduating! Dan will be working with Femida in an administrative function.

Thank you for all that you do.

We extend our sincerest appreciation to Kalen Flynn and Allison Thompson for their whole-hearted service as DSSC chairs. Kalen and Allison have finished their service as co-chairs, leaving us a high bar to measure up to. We look forward to a great semester! We will be going to Linvilla Orchards on Saturday, October 22 at noon for some apple picking fun. Please let us know if you have any ideas for DSSC or if you are interested in serving as a future chair.

Sincerely,

Dan Heist and Ryan Petros

DSSC Co-chairs
STUDENT EXPERIENCE  Allison Russell, MPA

Impact Factor

One of the best things about getting to know my fellow students at SP2 is learning about everyone’s unique journeys. We all traveled down a different road to find this program and the people who instruct, inspire, and collaborate with us each day at Penn. For me, that journey started when I accepted a position as an editorial assistant for the academic journal Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly (NVSQ) at UNC-Wilmington.

I had never imagined myself moving to Philadelphia, let alone applying to Penn for a doctoral program. In reality, I wasn’t even interested in studying the nonprofit sector when I accepted that position over three years ago; I wanted to get my MPA and work in local government. But as I became more and more connected with this community of nonprofit scholars through my role at NVSQ, I realized that I wanted to be a part of it.

During the past three years, I have developed a complicated relationship with NVSQ. It has frequently been a source of frustration, from dealing with incorrectly formatted submissions, to sorting through an endlessly cluttered inbox, to trying to coordinate the numerous moving parts that it takes to make the journal’s review and publication process come together. But it has also been a source of pride and accomplishment and, above all, encouragement to take the first step on this journey.

As my NVSQ days come to a close, I find myself feeling immense gratitude for all the people with whom I have had the privilege to work on NVSQ. Without them, and—dare I say it?—without NVSQ, I may never have ended up here. And so I will leave you with this advice: Always trust in yourself and the journey that brought you to this program, and always read all submission guidelines before submitting your research for consideration by an academic journal! The managing editor will be eternally grateful.

Welcome Letter  Professor Femida Handy

I am delighted to be appointed as the new Director of the PhD program at SP2. In my career, the supervision of PhD students has been and always remains a highlight, and when the opportunity presented itself, I was delighted to take the leadership role as the Director of the PhD program. I look forward in my new role to bring all PhD students at SP2 into my circle of interest and attention, and work towards prioritizing their concerns and long-term interests.

I want to extend a warm welcome to my first cohort of students entering the PhD program: Megan Farwell, Marquisha Lawrence, Shana Merrill, Peter Simonsson, Melissa Skolnick and Viviana Wu; as well as to all the returning students. I look forward to meeting each of you individually in the very near future.
I am fortunate to be assuming this position after a series of very strong Directors have left their marks on the program. Their enthusiasm and diligence have given us a robust, energetic, and highly respected program, and I plan to build on their success.

Over the past 10 years, of mentoring doctoral students and assistant professors, I have gained a deeper insight into the challenges that students face in completing their degrees and attaining positions in academe, as well as those facing them as newly minted young assistant professors. One of my priorities is to make the graduating SP2 students the most successful and sought after candidates in academe!

I am proud of the PhD program we have in place for our students because it is rigorous and heavily focused on research. Publishing papers is integral to professional success for students who seek academic careers. For many years now, we have been promoting the need for publishing by our students prior to their completion of the program. Based on new ideas from my colleagues, we can work to strengthen these research possibilities and promote collaborative research between PhD students and faculty. The early results from our Summer Fellowships are encouraging. Going forward I will continue with this initiative; it provides up to six fellowships of $6,100 each, which has the promise to result in publishable papers and is based on collaborative work.

I will use our resources over the next several years to ensure our PhD students leave with the best possible track record and securing the best possible academic/research related jobs. I will aim to enhance our reputation across the university and relevant professional and academic organizations. To this end, using online and social media outlets such as videos, webpages, Facebook, Twitter, and LinkedIn, I want to expand the visibility of our program and highlight the accomplishments of our PhD students. Please approach me with any ideas you may have to achieve this goal.

Our PhD program has been thoughtfully redesigned over the last several years, resulting in strong cohorts of students. We should work collectively to continue this progress. And, there is no doubt that I will need help with all of this. If there are particular areas you would like to pursue or ideas that you would like to see come to fruition, please do reach out to me. I do appreciate the encouragement I have received from students and colleagues, and I am grateful for this opportunity to serve as your PhD director.

**New Students**

**Megan Farwell**

Megan Farwell is originally from a small town in eastern Washington, but she considers Seattle home. She worked in fundraising and administration for several human services nonprofits before earning her Master of Social Work and Master of Public Administration from the University of Washington. Immediately following graduation, she served as the research manager for Harvard Kennedy School’s Women and Public Policy Program. In this role, she managed content development of the Gender Action Portal, a repository of policies, strategies, and organizational practices that close gender gaps.
Prior to joining Penn’s doctoral program, Megan was the director of learning and analytics at United Way of Snohomish County. Here, she oversaw the organization’s research and evaluation efforts, working with program, marketing, and fundraising staff to measure and improve overall performance. Her research interests include nonprofit sustainability and capacity building. She and her adviser, Dr. Femida Handy, are currently working on a project that explores fundraising professionalization and ethics.

If she ever has free time again, she plans on binge-watching reality television with her husband, Phil, and their 20-lb cat, Mr. Bitters.

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### Marquisha Lawrence Scott

Marquisha Lawrence Scott is originally from Nashville, TN. Before coming to the University of Pennsylvania, she was working on her Master of Social Work and Master of Divinity Candidate at the George Warren Brown School of Social Work at Washington University in St. Louis and Eden Theological Seminary, respectively. During that time, she worked as both a researcher and community organizer. She received her Bachelor of Arts degree in Political Science from Washington University in St. Louis, in 2010. Her research interests are centered on analyzing the impact faith-based institutions have on social justice and urban community outcomes. Scott considers herself an international traveler, foodie, and bibliophile.

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### Shana Merrill

My name is Shana Merrill and I am beginning the PhD in Social Welfare Program this semester. I am from Egg Harbor Township, NJ. I have lived in Philadelphia for almost 8 years, working as a clinical genetic counselor for the Clinical Practices of the University of Pennsylvania. Prior to my time in Philly, I attended Lafayette College for undergraduate studies, the University of North Carolina in Greensboro for a master’s degree in genetic counseling, and practiced as a prenatal genetic counselor in Southwest Virginia. Along the way, I have worked as everything from a waitress to an orthodontic assistant to a high school teacher and coach to research consultant. I enjoy live music and volunteering with an organization called Love Hope Strength, traveling, good beer, outdoor activities, and sports of all kinds. My advisor is Professor Allison Werner-Lin and my current research interests lie in health care disparities, the societal and personal impacts of increasing medicalization of families with genetic conditions, and the intersection of social policy and genetic technologies.
**Peter Simonsson**

Peter Simonsson is a Swedish Ph.D. student in Social Welfare at the University of Pennsylvania. He holds a Master's degree in Clinical Social Work from New York University (NYU), and a Bachelor’s degree in Practical Philosophy from Lund’s University in Sweden. Peter’s research investigates violence in the severely mentally ill population and the risk factors that can evoke violent behaviors in individuals diagnosed with schizophrenia. Peter is also interested in childhood abuse and developing more knowledge about the impact of such trauma on children and the risk factors that can cause children to develop more severe psychopathology later in their lives. His advisor at SP2 is Dr. Phyllis Solomon. Peter moved to the United States in 2006 to study clinical social work in New York. Since 2009 Peter has provided services and treatment to sexually abused children as a therapist and later on as a “Director of Survivor Services” at the Joseph J. Peters Institute (JJPI) in Philadelphia, PA. As a Director, Peter was responsible for the clinical care of more than 1,000 families annually who received outpatient and prevention services for sexual abuse and other forms of interpersonal violence. Before leaving JJPI, Peter was part of the task force that developed Philadelphia’s first “Johns School”. He is a licensed clinical social worker and serves on several committees and task forces to reduce childhood sexual abuse, prostitution and sex trafficking in Philadelphia. In his spare time, Peter enjoys spending time with his family and friends. He enjoys reading German philosophy and is also a death metal and horror movie enthusiast.

**Melissa B. Skolnick**

Melissa Beatriz Skolnick is a documentary filmmaker and multimedia storyteller, who uses these platforms to bring awareness to social justice and human rights issues that are often ignored. She holds a Master of Social Work degree from the University of Pennsylvania, and a Bachelor’s degree in Sociology from the University of Delaware. Since 2010, she has been working with nonprofits and arts organizations throughout Philadelphia, while using a range of tools for community building and storytelling.

Soon after attaining her MSW, she served as a grant writer at Esperanza. More recently, she served as the Creative Consultant for the SP2 Penn Top 10 Social Justice & Policy Issues for the 2016 Presidential Election. In addition, she also co-taught two classes at SP2, which focused on multimedia journalism and social change. Her latest short film, The Engine of My Life, was produced with Media Mobilizing Project and focuses on immigrant rights. She is excited to pursue a PhD at SP2 and gain more experience as a multimodal researcher, through working with her advisor, Dr. Ezekiel Dixon-Román. Her research interests include the intersection of social justice policy, visual ethnography, and the arts. She is also passionate about migration and identity across the Latin American diaspora. For fun, she enjoys cooking and going to live music events.
Viviana Wu

Born and raised in Hong Kong, Viviana graduated from the University of Hong Kong with a BScSc in Government and Laws and an LL.B., and earned a MS in Nonprofit Leadership at SP2 in 2015 before joining the Ph.D. program in Social Welfare.

Following her passion for innovation and citizens’ collective action, she served as the Operations Director of Young Entrepreneurs for Society Network (YES Network), a social innovation nonprofit that nurtures young social entrepreneurs to execute innovative solutions to solve social problems in Hong Kong. Besides working as a research assistant for five years, she also managed academic teams to produce multimedia teaching cases in nonprofit management under Hubert Project. Last year, she worked as a teaching assistant for the Executive Program in Social Impact Strategy at the Penn Center for Social Impact Strategy (CSIS), and a research assistant to Dr. Chao Guo who is her current adviser. As part of her research apprenticeship, Viviana is going to serve as the Managing Editor of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly (NVSQ) while continuing her research on how nonprofits and citizens at large can impact society through advocacy, collaboration, mobilization, and innovation on social media and offline platforms. In her spare time, Viviana sings praises and always counts the grace around her!

Alumni Spotlight  Elizabeth Noll, PhD 2015

Tell us about your work as a Senior Research Associate at the Institute for Women’s Policy Research.

The Institute for women’s policy research (IWPR) is a leading think tank in the United States focusing on the quantitative and qualitative analysis of public policy through a gendered lens. IWPR works with policymakers, scholars, and public interest groups to design, execute, and disseminate research that illuminates economic and social policy issues affecting women and their families, and to build a network of individuals and organizations that conduct and use women-oriented policy research. I’m currently working in the Student Parent Success Initiative (SPSI) which focuses on supporting students with dependent children who are pursuing college. The initiative works to broaden student support services in colleges and their surrounding communities by raising awareness and educating institutional leaders and policymakers of the need for and importance of student parent supports to achieve the goal of increasing postsecondary participation and graduation rates within the United States.

My work has involved analysis of national education data, expert interviews, surveys, and technical assistance work conducted by IWPR, as well as literature reviews of national and state policies. My personal interest is student parents in community colleges and much of the work I have done thus far has focused on reviewing federal and state policies related to supporting child care for student parents; creating profiles of the community college student parent population and their unique needs – specifically the role that child care plays in the educational progress of student parents; examining the state of child care on community college campuses nationally and by state; and assisting in the
design of organizational strategies community colleges can adopt to expand access to affordable, quality child care for their student parents.

**You had considerable research experience prior to entering the PhD Program at SP2. What experiences in the program further prepared you to be a successful researcher?**

My background prior to entering the PhD Program at SP2 was in sociological theory and research related to public sector welfare, health, and educational systems. So, I came to the program with a good deal of experience in the use of quantitative methodology. I was interested in broadening my methodological skills to include strategies that would allow me to bring everyday life to policy analysis. There were no required qualitative courses at the time I took part in the PhD program but the program’s flexibility allowed me to take courses in other departments within the university that introduced me to ethnographic methods. The combination of quantitative and qualitative research methods coupled with an interest in public sector systems led me to explore Institutional Ethnography – a research strategy that empirically investigates the linkages across the local settings people encounter in their everyday lives with the ultimate goal of understanding the way in which micro-institutional practices can be used to examine the logic, mechanisms and micro dynamics of power that shape individuals’ experiences as they interact with systems of authority. I used this approach to examine the way work-first welfare policy and practice plays out in the lives of welfare-reliant single mothers who are trying to obtain a college degree. In addition, I found coursework in the history and theory of social policy and practice indispensable research tools.

**Do you have any advice for current SP2 PhD students regarding how to prepare to be an effective researcher?**

I would suggest to the extent possible that you relate assignments and readings in all coursework you do to the problem you find yourself thinking about most often – the one that sometimes keeps you up at night. Continually reflecting on your research interests throughout the PhD program will deepen your knowledge and help you develop expertise in your chosen area.

My own experience and that of others I admire in the social policy research environment suggests that it is the appetite for situating research questions in the context of people’s experience that makes an effective social researcher. And, while it is of course important to move through the program at the expected pace, I hope you do not take too seriously the trope you no doubt have already heard many times “A good dissertation is a done dissertation”. Without a personal commitment to the question you seek to answer it’s nearly impossible to survive the rigors of dissertation research or to do research that matters afterward.

**Is there anything else you think current PhD students should know in preparing to be competitive in the job market?**

Finally, I benefitted professionally and personally from the relationship I developed with other doctoral students in the program as well as with my dissertation supervisor, Bobbie Iversen, a scholar in my area of interest. Surround yourself with faculty and colleagues who will challenge you and who will do so kindly and with respect for you as a budding scholar. Network with those in the university and elsewhere whose work you admire by attending and presenting your work at conferences. You may be surprised how interested they will be in what you’re doing.

All the best!
Publications


Presentations


Labrum, T. (2016, September). Abuse of older persons by relatives with psychiatric disorders. Oral presentation at Utah Aging Alliance Fall Conference, Salt Lake City, UT.


**Awards and Fellowships**

**Peter Simonsson**: "Thanks to Scandinavia" Doctoral Student award for commitment to human rights. Thanks to Scandinavia Foundation, New York, NY ($15,500).

**Christina DeNard**: Doris Duke Fellowship for the Promotion of Child Wellbeing ($30,000 a year for 2 years).

**SP2 Doctoral Summer Research Fellowships**

**Travis Labrum**: Factors associated with the use of limit-setting practices towards relatives with serious mental illness.

**Allison Russell**: Volunteering and Well-Being among Working-Age Adults: A Longitudinal Study.

**Allison Thompson**: Determinants of Natural Mentoring Relationships Among Older Youth at Risk of Aging Out of Care.

If you have any inquiries or suggestions about the Fellow, please contact Travis Labrum (tlabrum@sp2.upenn.edu) or Ama Nyame-Mensah (amanyame@sp2.upenn.edu). Thank you!