GREETINGS!

Dear friends, colleagues, and classmates,

Welcome to spring semester! We hope everyone had a great break and are back at your work and studies with renewed energy. We understand that all of the first and second years had a very successful fall semester in classes - congratulations.

Last fall, DSSC organized a few get-togethers, including happy hours and apple picking at Linvilla Orchards. We’re working on planning more activities for the spring, so keep an eye out for invitations. One event we want to get on your calendar early is our end of the academic year party, which will be on May 5, from 4-6 pm. We will keep you updated as we finalize the details.

We hope to continue to cultivate a positive, supportive environment in the PhD program. Please don’t hesitate to reach out to us with ideas, suggestions, or concerns about how we can collectively do this.

We look forward to seeing you all out at a social event soon. Our best wishes are with you and your loved ones.

Sincerely,

Dan Heist and Megan Farwell
DSSC Co-chairs
My husband, Anthony, and I moved to Philadelphia not knowing a soul. However, we were greeted by the great hospitality of Dan Heist, 2nd year SP2 PhD student, and his family within the first few days of our arrival. From then on, I have been met with the helpfulness of the upper level PhD students and my cohort.

My experience at SP2 has had more moments of opportunity than obstacles. I’m a big planner and I love lists, which is why I cannot wait to start using my new 2017 Volt Planner! In the spirit of the beginning of the year and lists, my top 10 experiences at Penn and SP2 are:

1) **My Advisor:** To work with Ram Cnaan is the main reason I came to SP2 at Penn. Over this semester, he has been a great support and is models what it is to be great scholar. In my first semester, he helped me better understand the publication process and we submitted my first, first author publication!

2) **Maintaining a schedule:** I manage my classes like meetings and assignments like projects. I come to campus M-F from 9-6p and adjust very rarely. This schedule has allowed me to travel to visit family and friends, explore Philadelphia, and get rest, while managing my school and research schedule.

3) **Opportunity to speak in a MSW course:** In an effort to learn more about Philadelphia and its social justice efforts, I met a community organizer and SP2 lecturer. In spring 2017, I will speak to his Political Social Work course about my experiences organizing, in St. Louis, post-Ferguson.

4) **First IRB accepted:** They accepted it on the FIRST submission!

5) **Cohort Rituals:** Stats brought us closer together!

6) **Manuscript Mondays:** Setting aside time to write every week has been extremely helpful and something that I plan to continue throughout my career (the day may change, but you get the idea)!

7) **Stats Recitations:** We had the best TA ever, Jose Loya!

8) **Omelets from Wharton:** They really are amazing omelets!

9) **Grad Student Center:** It’s nice to work among people that I didn’t know. I was able to be productive without taking too many talk breaks. The hazelnut coffee is a plus, too!

10) **Walkability:** This semester was busy and getting to the gym was always possible, but Locust Walk and 34th-40th were perfect!

Overall, I have taken the advice given by Dean Jackson, during our program orientation. He told us to “make your time as a graduate student a time to manage being a scholar and have a full life.” I have taken that advice and use it as one of my reminders to operate as a scholar, while managing a life that I enjoy!
ALUMNI SPOTLIGHT

Melissa E. Dichter, PhD, MSW

Tell us about your work in your current position as an Assistant Professor at Penn

I started as an Assistant Professor on the Tenure Track in the Department of Family Medicine and Community Health at the Penn Perelman School of Medicine in March, 2016. In this position, I conduct research on health services and social determinants of health and teach and mentor graduate students and fellows. I also maintain an appointment as a Core Investigator at the Center for Health Equity Research and Promotion at the Philadelphia VA Medical Center, U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs. At Penn, I am also involved with the Penn Medicine Program for LGBT Health, the Center for Public Health Initiatives, and the Evelyn Jacobs Ortner Center on Family Violence.

My research focuses primarily on women’s experiences with intimate partner violence and healthcare and social services assessment of and response to such violence. This line of research intersects with areas of housing instability and homelessness, unhealthy substance use, and reproductive health and health care. A parallel line of research focuses on healthcare for sexual and gender minority populations.

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

My experiences in the SP2 PhD program set the foundation for my academic career and relationships. Being involved with research studies and teaching as a graduate student provided me with hands-on training for the kinds of work I would be doing after graduation and complemented the classroom learning. The relationships I developed with peers and professors during my time as an SP2 student have continued and evolved over time – these are my friends and colleagues with whom I still collaborate (and commiserate).

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

A few decision points that I made during and after my PhD program have helped me establish a strong academic career and position that works well for me. I developed my own primary data collection dissertation project and received external grant funding to support it – this required much time but also provided me with many learning opportunities and the start of strong research portfolio. I applied to multiple dissertation grant opportunities, ranging from small foundation grants to large federal grants; I had many rejections but received the grant that had the most funding and most prestige (from CDC). Following my PhD graduation, I took a postdoctoral fellowship position with the U.S. Department of Veterans Affairs (VA) that afforded me time to
focus on my research and build further professional relationships without competing demands of a heavy teaching load or committee work. Next, a five-year career development grant from the VA was like an extended post-doc with more money and opportunity. I didn’t rush into a tenure track position immediately from my PhD program so, whereas my peers from my PhD cohort are now enjoying tenured life, I am earlier on the tenure clock but have no regrets about the path I have traveled.

I think it is important to hear advice and also to recognize that, ultimately, this is your life and your career so if your mentors’ or others’ ideas about what you should be doing don’t fit with your own priorities, don’t hesitate to resist and pursue what works for you. Also, I recommend that you keep an open mind about what that might be. I would have never anticipated a position for myself within the federal government and, yet, the VA position has served me quite well. I have friends who expected to land a tenure-track position at a top research institution who have found themselves most satisfied at a teaching institution. Take advantage of the time in the PhD program when you can explore options and gain experience with lower stakes and don’t be afraid to try something you never thought you’d do.

Is there anything else you think current Ph.D. students should know?

Look around at your PhD program peers: these folks can be your lifelong friends and colleagues – you may proofread each other’s dissertations, babysit each other’s children, share job and grant applications, collaborate on projects and papers, celebrate milestones together, meet up at conferences, visit each other across the country or the world… you understand where each other has been and can provide support to each other moving forward.

**PEER CITES**

**Publications**


**Presentations**


**Awards, Fellowships & Grants**