



A Conversation About Ferguson and Social Work Education

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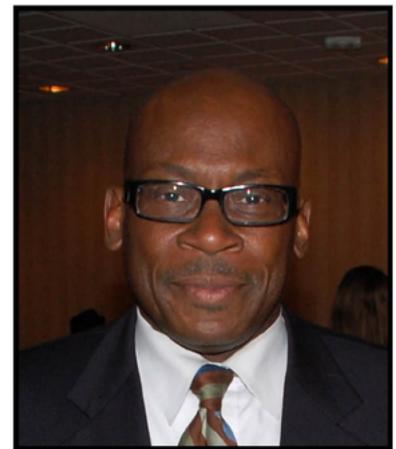
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Last September, as a new semester of classes and field placement commenced, the ugly realities of structural racism were front and center for all of us as social work educators, and especially for the faculty, students and social workers professionals in the St. Louis area. This issue's Conversation features an interview of Cynthia Williams, Assistant Dean for Field Education and Community Partnerships at the Washington University's Brown School in St Louis, by Gary Bailey, Professor of Practice at the Simmons School of Social Work about the immediate aftermath of the events in Ferguson. With Field Education's singular focus on hands-on practice, field educators possess unique opportunities to engage with students and local communities to address the persistence of institutional racism and injustice. -- Editor's Note

Cynthia Williams, MSW, is Assistant Dean for Field Education and Community Partnerships George Warren Brown School of Social Work. Assistant Dean Williams oversees the Brown School's relationships with over 400 nonprofit organizations, and she is responsible for over 170,000 hours of student service to the community each year.



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Gary Bailey: Why don't we start by you telling me what you do at Brown?

Cynthia Williams: I am the Assistant Dean of Field Education and Community Partnerships. I see this role in two parts: I provide administrative oversight and management of all aspects of the school's Office of Field Education for both the MSW and MPH degree programs.

Gary Bailey: That sounds like a lot just in of itself, so the part two must be daunting.

Cynthia Williams: Additionally, I work directly with our community partners, fostering sustainable educational partnerships that are designed to meet the needs of students. I also work with Brown School faculty and staff to ensure that our mission aligns with the identified needs of our community partners.

Gary Bailey: I would imagine that there are times when those pieces collide, when they are not in alignment?

Cynthia Williams: Yes, we observed gaps when events in Ferguson emerged. That is, when the issues related to Ferguson came to the forefront, we sought to increase the capacity and infrastructure of our community partnerships. Our view and sensitivity to our partnerships has heightened. The importance of having strategically placed partnerships is crucial and vital to addressing the immediate needs of community and organizations.

Gary Bailey: As we begin, let me just tell you a little bit about myself. I'm a Professor of Practice at Simmons. I'm the coordinator for our racism and oppression sequence, with a secondary appointment at our school of Nursing and Health Sciences.

From my point of view, as a person of color, what's been going on with Ferguson is an unavoidable reality. I live this reality. So it's personal as well as professional. That's the piece that makes it less abstract or academic, if you will, with what's going on in our major cities, be it Ferguson, Staten Island, Cleveland, and now Madison, Wisconsin. Also, the Department of Justice report clearly identifies that this has been going on for a lot longer in Ferguson and other nearby communities.

One hears about those communities and says, "There but for the grace of God, go I or someone I love or care about." The personal is the political and the political is the personal.

To get started, what was the faculty's reaction as you all came back to school starting the new semester?

Cynthia Williams: Frankly, I think it is accurate to say that most, if not all were stunned and

felt compelled to provide assistance in some capacity. At first we weren't sure exactly what was happening or the implications. The pain and anguish and an outcry from the community were apparent. But, there was also a need to address the underlying issues and contributing factors that lead to the tragic event and aftermath. "What is really happening?" and "What is the school's role in the healing of our community?" were the questions that were most often asked.

As a school and as residents of this community, I think it was fair to say that we were all in awe of the emerging community responses to Mike Brown's death. It was also amazing to see the response of our community organizations. All of the events have been transformative.

In reflection, the events in Ferguson evoked deep-rooted emotions about very sensitive topics, such as racism and police brutality. This challenged our preconceived notions about the "post racial America." Political, social and cultural ideologues collided and led to some initial polarization. Before long you felt as though you had to pick a side, professionally and personally. That was not an easy space to be in, but through these challenges emerged opportunities to engage in dialogues about our differences.

Gary Bailey: How did you all move through that process? The reason I'm asking that question is: as the leaders to whom students are turning and to whom the community is looking, how did you begin to move through that pain space into a space of taking action?

Cynthia Williams: Gary, this is an emotional space for me. Our Dean convened leadership meetings. In those meetings we looked to our leadership for a response and direction and looked for leadership among ourselves in this space. As best I could, I tried to keep it a solely academic response... I didn't always do a great job.

As a leadership group, our first question was "What are our existing resources?" In other words, "What do we have in place currently?" For example, of course we have a university website. So, a space on the Brown School website was created to increase awareness, share information and highlight community events. We needed to use that mechanism and others to be responsive to both the internal (students) and the external community (partners). Diverse individuals, students, staff, and faculty used the website as a platform to discuss the issues that emerged in Ferguson. Then, our diversity committee convened internal tabletop conversations. The diversity committee met and we discussed how we could respond first internally at the university and then externally in the community with lecture series, for example. I think it was a very good and genuine place to start because you can't help others until you can work to heal yourself and see yourself as part of the community that needs healing.

I was very pleased that we simultaneously looked at internal issues while also processing what

was going on in Ferguson. Our students at Washington University come from all over the world. Ferguson, for those of us who live in St. Louis, was a home issue. But for those new to St. Louis it was a time to help them understand the context of events through a historical lens. In many ways, we were assisting students, faculty, and staff in recognizing, acknowledging and addressing the horrific pain of social injustice, and there is no easy fix. It wasn't going to be like a sting, meaning you couldn't just take the stinger out and put a salve on it and then be OK in an hour. An authentic, multifaceted approach was needed.

It was clear that the anger and hurt wasn't going to go away. And if it wasn't going away, what did that mean for our community and our students? I cannot overemphasize how important that I believe it was to have conversations in our community at personal and institutional levels. We began having conversations, talking to each other, talking to our students in class, and contacting field instructors about students in the field.

Dean Lawlor corresponded with field instructors encouraging them to engage students in response to Ferguson in concert with the work of their specific agency. Our field instructors are very conscientious about supervision and safety of their practicum students. I have to say that when Chancellor Wrighton communicated very eloquently about the need to respond to the issues in Ferguson, I had never been more proud to be a member of the Washington University community.

Gary Bailey: There's a disturbing example in the news today about the incident in Oklahoma with the fraternity. I don't know if you've seen that. [for more background on this story please visit <http://kfor.com/2015/03/08/video-appears-to-show-university-of-oklahoma-fraternity-singing-racist-chant/> -Editor's Note]

Cynthia Williams: Not yet.

Gary Bailey: The incident was a white fraternity where young men taped racist language on a bus. Then there was a [video] posting of the bus along with disturbing chanting. The president of the University of Oklahoma immediately responded stating that the behavior was unacceptable, the head of the national fraternity then took away their charter, and the students who participated were expelled.

There was a quick reaction from people in power, to not let that incident fester. I believe if someone doesn't begin to do something from the top then we don't have credibility. Students want action.

Cynthia Williams: Absolutely. I agree. Related to Ferguson, our students wanted an immediate reaction and action from the University. And to their credit, many wanted and still want to be active in addressing the trauma particularly for communities of color. But they also want role models. Some

perceive themselves as activists but they wanted a roadmap. They really want guidance. Let me give you an example.

Gary Bailey: Please.

Cynthia Williams: We have some wonderful students whose intention was to go into Ferguson about seven days after the first set of protests. What they simply wanted to do was to go in and clean up the trash. Well, as well intentioned as it sounds, you cannot just go in and clean up the trash in a community! The community has to clean up the trash, and in fact they did. That was their obligation to themselves. We could have said, "Of course, you can go in." Simple right? What would be the harm? Well, it wasn't simple. It constituted going into a community without permission and without recognition of the harm that could be done.

So, a faculty member and I had that conversation with the students. "Yes, it sounds like a good idea, a good way to be helpful, and we want you to be active, but we want you to understand what community engagement looks like. We want you to understand how communities expect to be respected by even the smallest gesture."

Gary Bailey: That highlights the whole concept of what others and I sometimes refer to as "dysfunctional rescuing." People want to go in and do something but they don't take enough time to stand back and consider the implications. It happens with international tragedies too. Something will happen abroad and then people will say, "Well I want to go over there and do something."

Then I need to say, "OK. Let's talk about the stress your being there is going to put on already stressed infrastructure."

Cynthia Williams: Exactly.

Gary Bailey: You are going to take water from someone who needs the water.

Cynthia Williams: Yes, exactly.

Gary Bailey: OK, so we are saying the same thing, and how then can people feel empowered during a chaotic situation like the one in Ferguson. At the same time holding your students in a space that says, "your desire to do something is a good thing, but let's think about it, is it the right thing?"

Cynthia Williams: That's exactly right. I love that term "dysfunctional rescue." There were men and women in the community who needed to do something for their own community. They wanted to make a difference and they wanted to see a difference.

For them, cleaning the trash from the street after a night of protest, and taking responsibility for the neighborhood, was for them to do. Actually, I have family who live almost next door to the Quick Trip that burned. So, I knew the conversations intimately because I heard the conversation. The conversation was much like, "We can't do much more than pray, clean up the streets, and get to work if we can."

Gary Bailey: In that moment, that was the important action.

Cynthia Williams: Yes, for some that was their contribution to what some have come to believe is the beginning of a movement.

Gary Bailey: Faith and action, and then the ability to see that I have removed this piece of paper from my sidewalk. That action claims it as my sidewalk, that is, my sidewalk, belonging to me.

Cynthia Williams: That's right. That's exactly right.

Gary Bailey: How then did you harness that desire to take action? It almost sounds as if for a while you were in a bit of a holding pattern. Is that a fair description in terms of just how or when to intervene, or how to utilize, or mobilize resources?

Cynthia Williams: I don't think that's exactly the right term, because the situations didn't allow anybody to be in a holding pattern. Every decision was a decision, and it was an action. By virtue of having the conversation with students in the scenarios we just discussed, we were taking an action.

It was teaching and learning. That's just as much action, and just as important as perhaps writing a letter to be senator.

Gary Bailey: It makes sense, yes.

Cynthia Williams: We had to step back, appraise and start appreciating where we had been in the community. We had to integrate theory into practice and leverage the event for the teachable moments that we had really been preparing our students, our faculty, and our staff for all along. We had been laying the groundwork but now it was time to get out there and build on the foundation. You see what I mean?

Gary Bailey: I do, definitely. I definitely do.

Cynthia Williams: Yes. This is social work, this is social justice, this is public health and more impor-

tantly this is our community and finally the day came where we moved beyond the theoretical discussion to engage everyone who wanted to be engaged.

We definitely were engaged at different levels. Some were in shock longer than others. Some of our faculty, staff and students needed conversations to process their thoughts, beliefs, and emotions. Some were engaged in strategic planning and asked questions like “What does this situation call for?” Others needed conversations about safety, “Am I safe?” Others needed to be asked, “Are you safe?” Others just needed to say, “I love you,” and others needed to say, “Look, I’m not really involved. This is clearly outside of why I came here [St. Louis], but I am here.”

To me, Gary, it was all action. Nobody had the luxury of thinking that they were not impacting somebody or something else. That was made very clear, because you couldn’t just tread water.

Gary Bailey: Right. Paulo Freire says that no knowledge is ever neutral.

Cynthia Williams: I believe that as well.

Gary Bailey: When one has knowledge, one is then making decisions, and so that’s a helpful way of framing what you just said. I think that what it really looks like, and what I’m thinking of is the ways in which we sometimes rehearse for disasters, a disaster drill. And we always hope that disaster will never happen. Much of what we do in terms of the training of our students is in many ways disaster related.

Cynthia Williams: It is.

Gary Bailey: It’s the worst-case scenario. I don’t know any of my students that can operate from a good case scenario, but it’s the worst-case scenario that we are preparing them for. This was beyond in many ways that worst-case scenario, and it was both personal and external. It was both internal and external personally, so it’s all of those things together.

Cynthia Williams: Even more frightening is that it was not only personal, it was political, and of course it was also institutional.

Gary Bailey: Yes. I agree.

Though technology failed us at the end of the recorded interview, we believe we captured the essence of this very rich conversation. –Editor’s Note