

Monmouth University: Human Rights, Social Justice and Beyond

BY PETER CRAIG



LEFT: Dean Robin S. Mama. RIGHT: Assistant professor Joelle Zabolka (second from left) at the Cologne Cathedral in March 2019 with the five MSW students who piloted the German exchange program.

At the Monmouth University School of Social Work in northern New Jersey, it's all about human rights and social justice. To get Council on Social Work Education accreditation, any social work school must focus on those two areas to some degree, but at Monmouth, says Dr. Robin S. Mama, dean and professor, "both our BSW and MSW programs are grounded in a framework of human rights and social justice, which is a little bit unique."

Human rights and social justice govern what gets covered in class, the readings, the assignments, even the kinds of seminar topics and speakers the school might sponsor or co-sponsor on campus.

"We have a set of norms that we follow," Mama says.

"We try to use positive language; we watch what we say and try to teach the students about not using disparaging types of words to describe clients, for example. It's one of those things that filters down through both programs."

German Lessons

Building on those basics, how innovative has the Monmouth social work school been lately? One development, in this case for MSW students, has been an exchange program with Germany's Katho University.

After joining other Monmouth University faculty on an information-gathering trip to KathO in 2017, assistant professor Joelle Zabotka began to develop the program as part of a course on “Global Mental Health.” The exchange piloted in March 2019 with five second-year MSW students over 10 days at KathO. “We sat in some classes at the Cologne campus and had an exchange time with the faculty there,” says Zabotka. “Then we did some touring of different agencies. We saw some of their work on addictions, as well as a safe-use room, which had a nurse.” Other stops included residential children’s facilities, an elder-care institution and a homeless shelter.

Basically, adds Zabotka, “the students take a substantive area like addiction—substance use and misuse—and first look at what we’re doing here in New Jersey or more broadly in the U.S., policy-wise, agency-wise, treatment-wise. Then they move to Germany for comparative analysis.” This March, 12 students were all set to go to Germany until COVID-19 reared its ugly head, canceling the trip. (The German students may still be able to come in the fall.) The KathO trip will resume in March 2021 and

should eventually expand to include monthlong internships for at least two students each year.

Disaster Relief 101

A more unusual initiative, which the MSW program has been considering, is to develop curriculum around natural disaster-related community preparedness and mental health resiliency, in partnership with the Monmouth School of Science’s Urban Coast Institute. After all, the New Jersey coast was devastated eight years ago by Superstorm Sandy, a likely harbinger of storms to come. “We are still working on this, and hopefully after we are all back on campus again [following the COVID-19 emergency] we can give this project more attention,” says Mama.

Weighing Criminal Justice

Meanwhile, on the undergraduate side, the social work school recently partnered with Monmouth University’s Criminal Justice Department to launch the university’s first dual bachelor of arts degree in the two disciplines. In addition, they have been co-hosting workshops for community law enforcement on subjects like PTSD, veterans transitioning into police



TOP: Dr. Michelle Scott, director of the SRF Suicide Prevention Research and Training Project, conducts a law enforcement suicide-prevention workshop in April 2018.

BOTTOM: Attendees at the workshop.

work and suicide prevention among police officers.

Interest by officers at a suicide-prevention workshop led to the “first statewide study of suicide prevention and mental health in law enforcement,” says Mama, who is the principal investigator.

“We’ve been going since May 2019 to different law enforcement organizations or unions and having them fill out a fairly detailed

survey about what they think are the barriers to having law enforcement seek mental health services—where would they go, who would they talk to, what are the issues surrounding getting help?” The research is being supported by the school itself, along with its SRF Suicide Prevention Research and Training Project. 🔄