Jennifer Currin-McCulloch | Teaching Statement

I envision my classroom as a living, growing environment similar to a garden. By creating a setting that incorporates the perfect balance of nourishment (theory, clinical & advocacy skills, simulated learning), nurturing (engagement in self-reflection, critical thinking, self-care), and a safe space, students can flourish and grow into thriving social work professionals.

I strive to create an energizing, engaging, and supportive environment for students to explore their own professional and personal identities. To kindle students’ sense of curiosity about themselves and the world around them, I engage students in personal reflection about their history, cultural identities and intersectionalities, biases, strengths, and areas for growth. I create opportunities for self-reflection throughout course activities, written assignments, and small group interactions. I encourage students to broaden their perspectives by learning about other cultures and examining their own aspects of privilege. Each of my classes, regardless of content, includes an intersectionality exercise in which students reflect on how their cultural identities may influence their social work practice and the people with whom they will work.

I hope to cultivate students’ critical thinking skills and to encourage their commitment to professional development which will, in turn, support their clinical practice and nourish the communities in which they work. I believe that there are many ways to reach students within the classroom setting, and I draw upon innovative lesson plans to connect with each student. Classes provide opportunities for students to participate in interactive discussions, group activities, case scenarios, reflections from readings, and viewing of video clips. I incorporate a flipped classroom pedagogical style in most class sessions to encourage assimilation of knowledge from readings and employ a higher-level integration of knowledge. I frequently bring in ethical and clinical challenges from my practice experience to foster students’ ability to practice ethical decision-making early in their career. I strongly believe in continual testing of students’ knowledge acquisition through classroom discussions, simulated learning activities, and final take-home exams.

Students long for practical skills they can carry into their career. To support their skill acquisition and hands-on learning, I incorporate simulated learning activities throughout each course, including therapeutic interventions grounded in evidence-based practices. Each week students have the opportunity to add to their professional toolbox. A peek into my Social Work Practice with Groups course, experiential lab reveals students sampling solution-focused brief therapy, mindfulness-based stress reduction, and narrative therapy. Students also practice their newly-acquired skills through simulations with actors and student peers in group counseling sessions. Although the classroom setting will never compare to the real-world experiences students will encounter, they will be prepared to share their beliefs, navigate ethical challenges, and work individually and collectively to enhance the well-being of their clients and communities.

To plant foundational knowledge in one targeted social work population, each of my courses requires students to choose a population with which they would like to work in the future. Over the course of the semester, class assignments build on students’ knowledge of their chosen
population’s clinical needs and resources, incorporating relevant current research and evidence-based interventions. At the end of each course, students demonstrate enhanced understanding of their chosen group and frequently reflect on their sense of connection and eagerness to support the well-being of their population.

I enjoy sharing my focus of research with my students and engaging them in sharpening their research minds. Since the majority of my research questions evolve from gaps discovered in clinical care or unmet patient needs, I am able to blend insights from my studies into my practice and interprofessional classes. Students learn about the role of existential quality of life and how to perform assessments exploring what brings clients hope and a sense of meaning. My acquired knowledge about social determinants of health also fits nicely in micro and macro dialogues about social justice, health equity, and the intersections of health and mental health. Additionally, by sharing my enthusiasm for research and personal examples, I hope to cultivate students’ research mindsets and lessen many of their anxieties about designing and performing psychosocial research.

In order to cultivate the perfect environment for students’ growth, I incorporate several mechanisms for evaluation and student feedback. I strongly believe that students should take responsibility for their education, and thus I invite students to ask questions, suggest topics they wish to further explore, share areas in which they need further support, and offer suggestions on how I can better present the course materials. In each course, I implement a mid-semester online survey for students to offer feedback, which I then incorporate into the second half of the semester’s teaching. This living classroom environment appeals to students’ passions, fosters deeper reflection, and promotes self-efficacy in their education.

As a mentor to students, I take seriously my role in nurturing them in the development of self-care practices. Through modeling self-care practices such as opening each class with centering statements, pausing for moments to support each other, and developing self-care projects, students leave my classes with an enhanced understanding of ways to support their own well-being. On the last day of each course, our “Self-Care Show and Tell Day,” students share the self-care projects they worked on over the semester, which may include reading from their journals, showing paintings, exchanging recipes, leading the class in a yoga pose, or playing a tune on the ukulele.

I treasure the opportunity to nurture my students’ growth and to provide them a safe and open setting to explore their own identities, personal strengths, and areas for continued growth. By presenting them with a toolbox of skills and numerous practice opportunities, they will have the confidence to grow beyond their classroom roots to nourish the healthy development of individuals, families, and communities. Additionally, I intend to cultivate students’ sense of professional identity so that they will raise their voices for the greater cause of our profession and the health and welfare of those living within underserved communities.