# LGBTQ Studies – from the classroom to the real world

Dialogue has been edited for clarity.

Stephanie Nawyn (SN): This is Professor Stephanie Nawyn, the Co-Director of Academic Programs at the Center for Gender in Global Context, and I’m here with Dee Church, who is one of our LGBTQ & Sexuality Studies minor students. So, Dee, thank you for coming and talking with me about your experiences in the GenCen program. I understand that you did an internship with Equality Michigan this summer.

Dee Church (DC): Yea, I did. I was a Victim Advocate Intern. It was a part of, actually, my Psychology major internship, but I sort of combined it with my interest in LGBTQ Studies and what I want to do later on: social work. I suppose my primary responsibilities were learning about how advocacy works; getting what the resources were out there; what’s the political climate in Michigan and in the Detroit area; as well as, tabling at all the different Pride events and talking to community members. It was a really good experience!

SN: Great! And you’re a social work major?

DC: No, I’m a Psychology major, but with an interest in social work. Well, originally I was trying to get into the social work program, but then I was like “I’ve taken so many Psychology classes. Might as well just do the whole thing, as I can still get into social work programs with a Psychology major.”

SN: Very smart. What kinds of things did you take out of that internship?

DC: God, so much! A lot, I suppose, about research. The Director for Equality Michigan, Stephanie White, would give me tasks. For example, there was this amicus brief in 2014 because for like a half-second or a day or something, marriage equality was legal. About 300 couples got married, and then Michigan was like: “wait, wait, wait—no.” Then a group of Michigan republicans came out with this amicus brief being like “we support marriage equality.” My task was to research this amicus brief and get the names of those Michigan republicans, because she was planning to see if those same republicans who stood for marriage would also stand for amending the Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act. Michigan’s Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act—signed in 1976—offered a bunch of different protections in terms of race, religion, height, weight, etc., but not for sexual orientation and gender identity. One of the things I learned in my internship is that, in Michigan, a lot of people still faced discrimination for their sexual orientation and/or gender identity. They get fired from their jobs, denied housing, denied public accommodations for being gay, trans, etc.

SN: So you did a lot of research, legal advocacy, policy, and public outreach, I imagine?

DC: Yeah—a lot of public outreach. Under the mentorship of our Director of Development, Patrick, I assisted with outreach to different universities, and was like “hey, we have these Elliott-Larsen Civil Rights Act petitions—would you be able to pass those out at your resource fairs or events?” After hearing back, I would send the petitions or drive to different universities to drop off those petitions. This is currently in the works, as our lobbying day is September 28th.

SN: Oh, wow! So coming up very fast.

DC: Yeah, so that’s a thing [laughs]. I think there’s actually going to be an event in Lansing, where Equality Michigan will provide training and such on how to lobby.

SN: So, you’ve completed the internship. How has this internship and the things that you learned shaped what you’re doing now in your own studies—in and out of the classroom?

DC: It’s done a lot. I know entering the internship, I was just like “I want to do so much!” and then the internship gave me a direction, with current stuff and ways to go about it. Through my experience with SACI (Sexual Assault Crisis Intervention) team on-campus, I already knew about advocacy and how to talk to someone over the phone, but Equality Michigan put it more in an LGBTQ context, going out and talking to people, and actually meeting with clients. With SACI, it was all hotline advocacy that I was (and am currently) doing).

SN: But now you’re doing some work with LGBTQ survivors, right? Through the Sexual Assault Program?

DC: Yeah! So, last year I got elected as the Community Outreach Chair for SACI, and one of the projects that I’m doing is helping to facilitate an LGBTQ survivors of sexual assault and domestic violence support group. Over the summer, with Equality Michigan, I made a bunch of connections with organizations, one of those being Affirmations. I went through their volunteer and facilitator training to facilitate support groups. After the training, I was wondering if we could do something like this for SACI. So I emailed some of the therapists with the Sexual Assault Program and they were excited about the idea and agreed to meet. I also worked with the other Dee—the Director of the LBGT Resource Center—on this. Dee was interested in getting Olin Health Center involved, because Olin Health Center is going to open up an office on the third floor—last I heard—that is going to offer HIV and STI testing for students. All this great stuff is happening—it’s very exciting, it’s a lot, and it’s wonderful!

SN: And then, just recently, you enrolled in the LGBTQ and Sexuality Studies minor, correct?

DC: Yes.

SN: So, why did you decide to enroll in that minor?

DC: I really have a passion for LGBTQ topics, being in that community myself. Also, coming to Michigan State, I transferred from a school whose Psychology program wasn’t very inclusive. I remember they were just like “hey, so we teach this very narrow view of Psychology.” [laughs] I mean, they used different words, but that’s basically what was happening. There was a chapter about gender and sexuality that they didn’t include in the book because it was “super controversial,” but said we can read it if we wanted to. I was like “yea, I can be mad today. Why not?” So, the chapter basically supported conversion therapy and the findings of it. I was like “uh, no,” and I transferred to Michigan State, knowing that Michigan State was a more inclusive school than my previous one, the history of it, and that there was an LBGTQ studies course. That’s what first got me into the minor, because I was like “what is LGBTQ history?” There’s just so much history, and it’s complex, multi-faceted, and just so interesting. After that, I did a workshop at the Unitarian Universalist Church of Greater Lansing about LGBTQ history, and talked with a bunch of high schoolers at this convention. It just kind of snowballed into adding this minor, because this is what I really want to do with social work, and this is the population I want to work with.

SN: Well, we’re so glad that you enrolled and that you had such a great experience doing this internship. Your experience is really what I’d like to see all of our students have, right? To go into it with like an idea of “this is going to be interesting,” and then to come out of it with a whole new set of skills, resources, and passion. So I’m really glad you had that great experience.

DC: Yea, thank you for having the minor available!

SN: Oh, you know, I just showed up and it was here. [laughs] As you know, the history of these things is complex, and a lot of people put in a lot of hard work, and we continue to do it because of students like you that are getting a lot out of it. For those of you listening: if you’re interested in learning more about the LGBTQ & Sexuality Studies minor, you can email the GenCen Undergraduate Advisor at gencenad@msu.edu. Thanks very much.