Fall 2020 Orientation Welcome from Dean Jacqueline B. Mondros

Welcome Social Welfare Students!

It is a true privilege to have you here at Stony Brook.

The first days of school can be exciting, filled with questions, and some worries. This year there might be more worries and questions than usual. My promise to you is that this School and our staff and faculty will do our best to answer your questions and calm your anxieties. For this semester (and it is not my preferred venue) we may have to do it by phone, or email, or text, or Zoom, but we will help you whenever you need it!

I think we can all agree that this has been a difficult time. Some of you may have lost family members and friends in the pandemic. You may have been sick yourself. Some of you had to support your families through this time — young children or elderly parents — perhaps while you were also working or studying or both. All of us have been quarantined and isolated, separated from our support networks and without a lot of downtime and fun. Our employment and financial security has been impacted, in some cases quite seriously. There is evidence that our mental health has probably been affected so we need to pay attention to that too. And of course, we have been outraged yet again by the enduring prevalence of injustice and systemic and institutionalized racism inherent in our economic, social and political systems, seen most prominently (but certainly not solely) these days in the police and legal system and in health care. Your education begins during this tripartite crisis in public health, the economy, and our democratic institutions.

These crises beg for self-reflection. What choices have we made and why have we made them? Over the last several months I have had to ask myself: what has it meant to be a social worker all these years? What have I — with almost 50 years in the profession — accomplished? What am I still trying to do? And why should I
tell you in this most chaotic, troubled, and scary moment, you should become a social worker too. I have come to a simple answer: no matter the path you choose, you want to become a social worker because you will make a difference in people’s lives.

You will soon discover that there is no single way to be a social worker, and you will have many options. For those of you who want to be clinicians, you will help individuals, families, couples, and groups with a wide range of challenges—everything from their health, mental health, and substance abuse, to their immigration issues, their struggles with age and disabilities, their housing and homelessness. You can work in a wide range of settings from hospitals to prisons and the courts, to schools and universities to community programs, to residential care settings. Whenever people are helpless, or lost, or in need of support you will be there at their side, to help, to partner with them on finding solutions, to advocate, and to make a difference.

For those of you interested in working in administration, you will develop programs, write grants, raise the money that will change people’s lives. You will generate the programs that may support people re-entering from prison, to prevent people from evictions, for young fathers, for women who have been abused or trafficked, for kids with special needs, for veterans, for older adults who want to remain at home, and for adolescents who have been bullied, perhaps because of their gender or sexuality orientations. You will learn how to evaluate your programs and use the findings to make sure they have the best outcomes. And you will make a difference.

And for those of you who have your eye on organizing and policy change (and I hope there are a few of you), you will learn how to bring people together across their differences and divisions, to develop policy solutions to serious social problems, to design persuasive messages for the media and for elected officials that convinces them to pass and implement legislation that treats people equitably, inclusively, and fairly no matter their race, religion, gender, age, country of origin, or sexual orientation. And you, you will make change.

We hope you were excited when you received word of your acceptance to our School. But we are also excited that you are here. As much as you wanted us, we
wanted you. We need you to make the difference. We need you to be relentless and inventive on behalf of people. For you see, you are our future too.

You start making a difference here today, at orientation. Whatever path you choose, we want you to become passionate about it. Whatever you choose, we have someone here on our faculty and staff who will help fuel that passion. The faculty, staff, and administration of this School will partner with you to make your dream career a reality.

And yes, you will have wonderful student peers (the folks in these little squares) who will be a tremendous source of sustenance and support on along the way. I too, am in this moment with you, every step of the way, still trying to get better at what I do, still trying to make a difference.

Now full disclosure, your social work journey will not always be fun or easy. I am extremely saddened that we live in an era of incivility and deep divides—there are probably some even amongst us today—and it is going to be hard to work on our biases and divisions. It is going to be hard to empathize, to respect others, to self reflect, to have courage, to be resilient and resourceful. You are going to deal with some very hot topics and very big problems, and clients with very serious challenges. We are going to talk about race and gender and social class, sexual orientation, and immigrant status—about as hot button issues as we have these days. But the hardest lessons often generate the deepest learning.

This will be a different year. We will have to take our temperature, perhaps get tested, use our IDs to enter our building. We will need to build relationships over computers, wear masks, be together while we are social distant. But if social workers are not up to the challenge, than who would be right? WE CAN DO THIS! WE WILL DO THIS!

If you have a cell phone, take it out now and take a selfie… and post it on your facebook page or instagram accounts. Post a video on Tic Toc. I want you to remember where you are today, what it feels like to be here, and who you are right now. Someday you will think back on this moment and compare it to who you have become and what you have done to make a difference.

Thank you again for coming to the Stony Brook School of Social Welfare