

Community Engagement Report: Mary Janell Metzger  
Intro to Women, Gender & Sexuality Studies & Northwest Youth Services

As a Service Learning fellow, I set out to develop an experiential learning project for an Honors section of Intro to Women, Gender & Sexuality Studies that I had taught once, with some frustrating results. With the opportunity to teach it again at the end of the fellowship year, I set out to imagine how to bring the course materials and learning alive for my students via experiential learning. I knew the crucial work of Northwest Youth Services in serving our homeless youth and their attention to the predominance of queer youth among that population realized in their Queer Youth Project. With the invaluable feedback of my fellows and colleagues at WWU, I constructed a course in which the readings were limited to four books that explored feminist and queer theory and the construction of gender norms with an emphasis on the construction of masculinity and race as the ground of multiple and crucial forms of inequity and violence in the United States. Students work in the classroom proper was one of reading, writing, presentation, discussion and collaboration, all in preparation to work in project teams for NWYS in a variety of capacities during the last three weeks of the course.

My greatest concern entering this project was to create a relationship of integrity with my community partner and in doing so help my students understand their lived relation to the ideas and practices that make up their academic and political lives as members of their campus, city and national communities. Though not every team of students fully achieved this goal, via the active work of collaborating, planning and applying their learning about inequity and justice as partners with a community nonprofit dedicated to youth, their understanding of themselves was transformed, and our community partner was strengthened in its efforts to serve homeless youth, develop stronger outreach to Queer Youth in our community, and imagine ways to connect to resources in the community and at the University.

In developing and realizing this project, I have learned a number of things as well. Trust the process is a process not just a slogan. More than ever, I and my students need to reckon with the pressure to commodify our learning and thus represent it in terms that suggest its transcendent fixity. Meaningful learning, we had to consistently remind ourselves, takes place in community and community is dynamic and requires trust in the process of developing the shared understanding that makes our lives and communities more just, equitable and thus vibrant places to work and live.