

The Massachusetts Promise Fellowship: Building a Community of Practice Founded on Social Justice Principles

By Cecelia Auditore

In August, the Massachusetts Promise Fellowship (MPF) began orientation for its 18th class of Fellows. At its core, MPF's mission is to ensure all youth receive the resources they need to be successful in life, which include a 1) a caring adult, 2) a safe space, 3) a healthy start, 4) an opportunity to serve, and 5) an effective education. In this work, forty AmeriCorps Fellows are trained to deliver these five resources to youth in grades 6-12 through intentional OST programs in schools, non-profits, and city agencies across the state.



In order to achieve this mission, Fellows have the responsibility to make space for conversations related to social justice, particularly as youth navigate the ever growing volatility of our political and social world. So, while youth outcomes, community and University partnerships, and training are also the pillars from which MPF stands, this space is being used to discuss social justice as an integral part

of this work. The following are some areas that our training assess, and some principals that guide our training curriculum:

Make the Time. One mandatory component to the program is that Fellows must attend a monthly training. Over the course of the year, Fellows receive over 170 hours of targeted training on skills related to youth development. MPF *makes the time* for trainings related to social justice, which provide tangible prompts or activities Fellows can bring back to their own programs. Through this curriculum sequence, Fellows engage in trainings on race, class, gender, LGBTQ awareness, ableism, and supporting refugee & immigrant youth, while also unpacking their own identity and how it impacts their service. Crafting shared group agreements and convening monthly is critical to building the community needed to have these conversations.

More opinions are better than one. MPF has spent years building an intentional network of outside trainers to facilitate the social justice curriculum, recognizing staff is neither equipped nor the best people to lead discussions around these topics. A Senior Fellow is hired each year to work alongside the Training Manager in order to co-coordinate the process of building the curriculum, preparing outside trainers, and bringing in the Fellows' perspectives. Ongoing and timely feedback is essential to meeting their needs as well as recognizing missteps, mistakes, and/or opportunities for greater learning.

Be Transparent. (And recognize that you may be part of the problem). On the organizational level, we are clear with our partners that Fellows will engage in a social justice curriculum and encourage

members to bring these topics back to their host sites. We acknowledge the fact that we're a white staff of three, and have our own blind spots. We also recognize the economic sacrifice of doing a year of service and the safety net, or privilege, some Fellows must have to serve in AmeriCorps. We believe that OST programs can only address systemic oppression by accepting their space within it and resolving to take action steps to intervene.



Set Goals & Hold yourself and others Accountable. One of the main goals of the social justice curriculum is to build a common language around issues of privilege and oppression, but much of this learning and unlearning starts on the individual level. Our central goal is for Fellows to leave the program with an understanding where they exist in relation to systems of power. Only through this exercise can they begin to understand how their identity impacts their service

delivery. That said, it's important to accept the fact that Fellows approach these discussions in different ways and moving the needle for one may be different for another, which leads to the final practice...

Accept the journey. At MPF, we strive to incorporate thoughtful reflection in all that we do, and, especially within our social justice curriculum. We admit the fact that this work is never done. As a manager, I admit that understanding my own racial privilege is a process that has and will evolve over time. Organizationally, we also admit that MPF is on a similar journey of discovery through the evolution of the social justice curriculum and welcome any/all feedback from our stakeholders.

MPF's social justice curriculum was born out of the need to better prepare our Fellows to have these conversations with their young people. This could not be truer today. So, as we learn and grow, we hope to join and welcome others in the conversation.

Cecelia Auditore joined MPF as a Fellow in 2008 and returned as their Evaluation Manager in 2013. For more information, contact her at c.auditore@northeastern.edu