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Transgender youth in the rural West

Denise J. Dowling
University of Montana - Missoula, denise.dowling@umontana.edu

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Associate Professor Denise Dowling received $3800 in funding from the University of Montana in order to pursue creative scholarship on the topic of transgender youth in the rural West. The entirety of the grant was spent on travel. In the 2015-16 academic year, Dowling traveled to three states conducting inquiry and interviews with gender-variant youth, their families, friends, health care providers, coaches as well as outside experts on the topic of trans youth.

Dowling traveled to Somerton and Tucson, Arizona a total of three times to document one gender fluid high-schooler as they (preferred pronoun) made the transition to college. The student was the first in their family to attend college and chose the U of A because it offers gender-inclusive housing. Dowling attended the subject’s high school graduation, met with them in their first weeks of college and again at the conclusion of their freshman year on campus. Dowling explored the challenges college administrators have in responding to the needs of transgender students and how family and friends reacted to the student’s transition.

Seattle, Washington is home to that state’s only homeless shelter for trans youth. Dowling met young people living in the home and interviewed them and their shelter supervisors. She learned the many reasons behind homelessness in this population. Dowling met with directors of several other programs in the Seattle-Tacoma area offering services to transgender youth to learn more about challenges faced by these young people and the support services that seem to be effective.

Across Washington in Spokane, Dowling spent time at a homeless shelter for all youth, but learned that a majority of the shelter population is in the LGBTQ community. Dowling spoke with the program director, some of the clients, a nurse on staff at the shelter and a counselor. They all offered insight into the plight of transgender youth who do not receive acceptance at home.

The grant allowed Dowling to travel to San Francisco to speak with a leader in the area of transgender youth and their health. Dr. Stephen Rosenthal spoke at length about the dearth of longitudinal studies of trans youth and their health challenges. He also shared the work going on at the Center for Excellence in Transgender Health and its affiliates worldwide.

Dowling met researcher Dr. Kristina Olson at the University of Washington who is conducting the first longitudinal study of gender variant children ages three to twelve. Dr. Olson has released early results of the study, comparing the mental health of children allowed to live their identity with like-aged “normal” children. Another study of Olson’s reveals the age at which transgender youth come to express their gender difference. Researchers are in the field now
conducting the first interviews with more than 200 subjects and their families all around the country.

Dowling has compiled hours of audio recordings and has logged all of it. She has completed her interviews and will work in the 2016-17 academic year to write and edit a series of radio reports. The reports will be pitched to a national audience through National Public Radio. State public radio outlets in Washington and Montana have agreed to air the programs once they’re finished and it’s expected Arizona Public Radio would want to air it as well.

Dowling was an invited speaker at the Association for Education in Journalism and Mass Communication’s national convention in August, 2016. Dowling was on a panel entitled, “Call me Caitlyn, examining representations of transgender.” She has also been asked to moderate a panel for UM’s Diverse U in November focusing on transgender college students.

The work done on the grant has been incorporated into Dowling’s teaching this semester. She has incorporated presentations on reporting on the trans community in her Ethics and Trends in the News Media course and technical lessons she learned about audio recording have made their way into her Intermediate Audio course.

Thank you to the University of Montana for funding this important project.