



WOMEN'S, GENDER, AND SEXUALITY STUDIES PROGRAM

Illinois State University

ALUMNI MATTER

A bulletin of Illinois State University's Women's, Gender, and Sexuality Studies program

August 2021

A word from the director

Dear WGSS alumni,

I will remember this academic year as “The Longest Year”—an eternity of days filled with disorienting demands, isolation, and anxiety about the health of our friends, neighbors, families, planet, and our democracy. Throughout the year I’ve returned repeatedly to Arundhati Roy’s wise counsel about moving forward through difficult times. She reminds us that “historically, pandemics have forced humans to break with the past and imagine their world anew. This one is no different. It is a portal, a gateway between one world and the next. We can choose to walk through it, dragging the carcasses of our prejudice and hatred, our avarice, our data banks and dead ideas, our dead rivers, and smoky skies behind us. Or we can walk through lightly, with little luggage, ready to imagine another world. And ready to fight for it.”

The dust from the longest year has yet to settle. Yet I’m holding fast to the hope that we can collectively seize this rare opportunity to emerge from our suffering with larger hearts and a greater sense of what’s important to us. I know that our Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies (WGSS) faculty, staff, and students have stepped up to care for one another in ways that are at once powerful and humbling. I want to thank all of you for the extra care and attention you’ve offered one another when the world made absolutely no sense and when it demanded every last ounce of your precious energy. Many of you educated your children, bought or cooked extra food for those in need, and supported those who were ill, unemployed, or in crisis. I’ve heard many of you say that you are “soooooo over the longest year,” but I ask you not to forget the lessons you’ve learned.

As the fall semester approaches, I’ve had the chance to reflect on the strength and resilience of our WGSS community. We took turns staffing the office during the pandemic.

[Venise Keys '16](#) made a special trip to Normal to install her

colorful paper-cut mural in the Rachel Cooper Art Gallery. Our students, faculty, and staff gathered online to organize one of the best research symposiums we’ve had. I have to admit the thought of having an online symposium was overwhelming for me. We had to cancel our 25th Symposium last year, and I did not want to do skip another year. So, we assembled a massive and energetic committee and reimagined the event as a week-long series of student presentations, two keynote zoom lectures, and a dance performance. Our program was filled with poetry, performance, crochet lessons, talks, and academic panels. It was the 24.5th Symposium, and it was perfect. We are saving the 25th for spring 2022, and we hope you’ll join us!

This was also a year of big changes. We said goodbye to Dr. Tom Gerschick (SOC), who retired in December. Tom always enthusiastically stepped up to help us out when resources were scarce. He taught additional WGSS classes when we needed them and twice served as our academic advisor. We also bid farewell to Dr. Venus Evans-Winters (EAF), who taught our Black Feminist Thought class for five years, and to Dr. Tanya Diaz-Kozlowski (WGSS) who served as our assistant director and academic advisor. We welcome Dr. Jenna Goldsmith, an ISU alum and former WGSS program graduate assistant, who has returned to campus as our new assistant director and academic advisor. We have also been given the green light to conduct our third WGSS joint tenure-track faculty hire with the Psychology Department.

So, keep making us proud. And, don’t forget to stop by the WGSS program office when you’re in town. We love catching up with our alumni.

All Good Things,

Alison Bailey

Director

What's happening at WGSS?



24.5th WGSS Research Symposium invites us to reconcile, rebuild, and recover

Our annual [WGSS Symposium](#) moved forward this year under the banner of Amanda Gorman's Inauguration Day poem, "The Hill We Climb," a powerful call to action focusing on themes of hope, unity, healing, and resilience. This year, in addition to student presentations, the symposium committee invited three [keynote speakers/performers](#) to explore contemporary topics related to the conference theme. Dr. Tristen Johnson, a diversity education specialist and former Illinois State student, took participants on a historical journey showing how even in 2021, Black women are still fighting to debunk the racist and sexist ideals. Her lecture offered tangible tips for "allies" to use to support, include, acknowledge, and center the contributions of Black women in personal, professional, and social spaces. Harsha Walia, a South Asian social activist and writer, delivered an unflinching examination of migration as a pillar of both global governance and gendered racial class formation. Her lecture explored a number of seemingly disparate global geographies and how borders around the world consolidate imperial, capitalist, ruling class, and racist nationalist rule. ISU's own Laina Reese Carney (THE), a choreographer, educator, and dance performer, screened a thought-provoking student performance and talk back for the community. The short performance sparked dialogue in response to the #SayHerName social movement that seeks to raise awareness about Black women and girls who are survivors of police brutality and anti-Black violence in the United States.

Dr. Jenna Goldsmith hired as new assistant director

In the early 2000s, Jenna Goldsmith '08, M.S. '10 worked for a few years as the graduate assistant in the WGS program office. She went on to earn her Ph.D. in English (20th Century American Literature) from the University of Kentucky in 2016. In 2020 she returned to campus as one of three recipients of Illinois State's Outstanding Young Alumni Award—an award that recognizes the contributions of

outstanding young alumni to society, their profession, or Illinois State University. We are thrilled to have her back at ISU as our new assistant director and academic advisor! Goldsmith points to her time at ISU as being "germinal in my development as a feminist, particularly as it relates to my understanding of history." As an undergraduate, she minored in WGSS and took two women's history courses. Goldsmith says she "always tell[s] my students to take a women's history class, if they can" because "women's history explains and contextualizes so much of what we experience now." In fact, Goldsmith says she "often cite[s] a historical event I first learned about in one of Kyle Ciani's classes!" Please join me in welcoming Jenna Goldsmith back to our community!



Rainbow Floor: A living community for LGBTQ+ identifying students

By Morgan Shurtz

Illinois State University housing will debut its first identity-based living and learning community this fall. [The Rainbow Floor](#) is designed for students interested being part of a living community supportive of LGBTQ+ identifying students. The inaugural floor is open to both students who identify as LGBTQ+ and their allies. The community will offer opportunities for professional and community involvement. In the past, living-learning communities have been organized thematically around academic majors and common extra-curricular interests, but Rainbow Floor will be the first to center queer identities. The Rainbow Floor organizers are well aware of the challenges facing students who are new to the ISU campus community and who may struggle to find a place where they feel at home. Rainbow Floor offers a safe place for students to express themselves and to make connections with other students sharing their identities and interests. Thanks to Dr. Cassie Herbert (PHI/WGSS) for being their floor mentor.

Inevitability and intersectionality: Rachel Sabella advocates for expanded gender identity on death certificates

By Ray Hatch

Rachel Sabella '21 considers herself a person who understands death positivity. “Death positivity is really just being comfortable with the fact that you will die, and that realization helps you embrace life. It reminds you to see what is important,” said Sabella, who has seen people dealing with death more than most. Since the age of 10, Sabella grew up above a funeral home in O’Fallon, where her mother, Kim, serves as the director.

As she grew older, Sabella began helping her parents in the funeral home with office work. One of the duties was acting as part of the two-person team required to enter death certificates online. When Sabella entered Illinois State University, her courses in the Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies (WGSS) program prompted her to look at the death certificates in a different light. “I’d always considered myself a feminist, but in college I began to re-examine my everyday views and decisions within the WGSS curriculum,” she said.

In WGSS classes, Sabella discovered the concept of intersectionality, a framework used to understand how a person’s social, gender, and political identities combine to shape perceptions that factor into privilege or oppression. “I realized how intersectionality played into death as well as life,” she said. The online categories for “sex” on Illinois death certificates were relegated to M for male, F for female, and U for unknown—a term used when the sex of the remains cannot be determined. “U is meant for really extreme circumstances,” said Sabella, “but my fear was that funeral home directors might be using the box when there was a question of gender identity.” Sabella brought her concerns up to her mother on more than one occasion. “It just didn’t seem right,” she said. Her mother agreed.

“The reality is that gone are the ‘old days’ of recognizing or identifying persons’ genders simply by the nature of their name, appearance, or frankly, limited and basic medical records and information,” said Kim Sabella. She emailed the Illinois Vital Records Division (IVR) of the Illinois Department of Public Health inquiring about a change. “The death certificate is an official legal document that is filed within the registration district in the State of Illinois when a person dies,” Kim said. “The integrity and accuracy of this document is, and should be, of utmost importance to the funeral director who is tasked with obtaining necessary information. One’s accurate gender identity is as important as the correct spelling of the deceased’s name, or Social Security number.”

Kim copied her daughter Rachel on the email, who provided further input. Rachel explained the difference between nonbinary and intersex and emphasized that more than terminology is at stake. “These are used as statistics by the state,” said Rachel. “If they wanted to report what percentage of breast cancer deaths are from women, there was a chance they were missing information.” Rachel also noted the significance of the date of her email reply, March 31, 2021. “We were corresponding on International Transgender Day of Visibility,” she said.

The representative from IVR thanked them for the suggestion, noting he would pass it along. As it turns out, the Illinois Department of Public Health had already been working on the change to systems. The Sabellas were not alone in their desire to move in the right direction. The IVR sent an email to Kim and Rachel on April 13, 2021, letting them know the change had been finalized. The system now offers the possibility of M, F, X, or U. “When X is entered, it prints as nonbinary,” said Rachel. “I read that email in Milner Library and I started crying with joy.”

Rachel noted it is the work of programs like Illinois State’s WGSS that lays a foundation for change. “I consider it thanks to educational opportunities like WGSS that this death certificate change was considered ‘inevitable,’” said Rachel. “Lots of people have worked so hard over the years to create a culture and society in which it’s becoming safer to talk about things like gender identity, and I am so proud to have gotten my education from our wonderful program.”

Graduating in May with a bachelor’s degree in anthropology and a minor in WGSS, Rachel now works as an intern



Rachel Sabella '21 and her mother, Kim.

with the Downtown Bloomington Farmers Market and for PrairiErth Farms. She continues to advocate for greater understanding of the importance of gender identities, both in life and in death. “People are, understandably, very uncomfortable when it comes to death,” said Rachel, “but it is a great opportunity to bring the people close to you into the conversation, and that includes gender identity.”

Ray Hatch works in Media Relations under the Office of the President at Illinois State University. She is working to complete her graduate certificate in Women’s, Gender, and Sexuality Studies.

Queer Coalition moves forward

By Dr. Gavin Weiser

Over the past two years, a group of colleagues across the ISU campus began brainstorming about how to reimagine a new LGBTQIA2S+ organization to support our community. The Queer Coalition grew out of two former organizations—the LGBT/Queer Studies and Services Institute and Triangle Association. Built initially from the work of Dr. Liv Stone

(ANT/SOC, WGSS, and LALS), Barb Dallinger (Event Management, Dining, and Hospitality), Dr. S. Gavin Weiser (EAF, WGSS, and LALS), and Dave Bentlin (Office of the President) began meeting in the fall of 2019 to strategize about building a new community organization. The inaugural meeting was held last February, but like all things during early 2020, it was put on hold during the pandemic. The advisory board began meeting virtually in fall 2020 to name the new organization and to draft the required [constitution](#) and [values statement](#). The new Queer Coalition emerged from these conversations. In January 2021 we elected our [first leadership board](#) headed by co-presidents Dr. Byron Craig (COM and AFAM) and Weiser. The Queer Coalition held their first large in-person picnic event on June 27. We invite you to visit our new [website](#).

Gavin Weiser (ze/hir/hirs or they/them/theirs) is an assistant professor in Educational Administration and Foundations and core faculty member in the WGSS Program.

Alumni updates

Katelyn Hale Wood ’07 has a new book [Cracking Up: Black Feminist Comedy in the Twentieth and Twenty-first Century United States](#). It was released in June, and they tell us that “it’s been a joy to finally see the book out in the world!” The WGSS library has a copy.

Venise L. Keys, M.F.A. ’16, recently had her article, “[We Need to Have Black Feminist Ideas in Arts Education](#),” published in *Hyperallergic*, an online arts magazine. Venise is a new charter member of Gamma Xi Phi Professional Art Fraternity, Inc., Kappa Chapter in the South Side of Chicago.



Jody L. Herman ’99 was recently promoted to senior scholar of public policy at the Williams Institute, a research center at the UCLA School of Law focused on sexual orientation and gender identity law and public policy. Her work focuses on the prevalence and impact of discrimination

against transgender people. She’s currently serving as co-principal investigator on the 2022 U.S. Transgender Survey and is working on several papers examining the

relationship between mental health indicators and access to gender-affirming care for trans adults. She is also working on updated estimates on the size and demographic characteristics of the U.S. trans population and two NIH-funded studies that seek to improve sexual orientation and gender identity mortality data and the health and experiences of nonbinary youth. Based in Los Angeles, she splits her time between LA and Peoria, where she grew up.

Erin Frost, M.A. ’09, Ph.D. ’13, is an associate professor of English at East Carolina University. She recently co-edited (with Michelle Eble), a collection of articles titled *Interrogating Gendered Pathologies* (Utah State University Press, 2020). The collection uses a range of complementary and intersectional theoretical approaches, to examine rhetoric’s role in health-care, how it differs depending on patient embodiment, and the ways nonnormative bodies are pathologized.

Tyler R Flockhart, M.S. ’12, credits his love of sociology to his time as ISU and the courses he took with Dr. Tom Gerschick. He is currently an assistant professor of sociology at Viterbo University where he teaches a range of courses on family, sex and gender,



race and ethnicity, juvenile justice, research methods, and institutional inequalities. His research interests include the scholarship of teaching and learning (SoTL), racially conservative and extremist groups, inequalities in parent-LGBTQ child relationships, and homophobia and heterosexism in popular television shows.

Radiance Campbell '20 recently completed her first year at Georgetown Law and began her position as a Lane Evans Home Court fellow at the Washington Legal Clinic for the Homeless. She is thrilled to continue working on issues of



Emma Belz

housing justice and becoming a part of the legal and organizing community in Washington, D.C. She is a Blume Public Interest Scholar.

Emma Belz '15, M.S. '18, has been working at Penn State University as a bystander education coordinator. She has recently returned to Normal.

Sarah Ehlers '04 has spent the past year adjusting to online teaching. She is looking forward to a summer of reading and writing, with a break from hours-long afternoons on Zoom! This August, she begins her term as the director of graduate studies in the English department at the University of Houston.

Emily Johnston, Ph.D. '16, has been promoted to associate director of the Dimensions of Culture Writing Program at the University of San Diego, where she is also a lecturer. She has received two teaching awards. She has been nominated for both the Outstanding Faculty Teaching Award and was recently awarded the Outstanding Faculty Award (2021). Her co-authored study on teaching empathy in first-year writing courses was accepted for publication by *College Composition and Communication*. She's also gearing up to hike Half Dome in Yosemite National Park this summer!



Fabiola Rosiles '16 is currently working toward her Ph.D. in higher education at Loyola University Chicago. She just finished her second year.

Kaitlyn Tossie, M.S. '17, is currently pursuing a Ph.D. in the Department of Theatre and Dance at the University of Kansas. She has also recently been appointed as managing editor of the *Journal of Dramatic Theory and Criticism*. Her dissertation explores how American playwrights remember and memorialize 21st-century American traumas such as 9/11, the War on Terror, and the Sandy Hook shooting. She expects to graduate in spring 2022.

Congratulations to our 2020-2021 WGSS Scholarship and award winners —

The **Luellen Laurenti Scholarship** and the **Dorothy E. Lee Scholarship** were awarded to Ally (Allison) McGuire.

When she was 23, Ally made an active effort to turn her life around and getting an education was part of that. She moved to Bloomington and took classes at Heartland Community College, where she completed her associate's degree. She is now working toward a Bachelor of Science degree in psychology with minors in sociology and WGSS. She is also completing the WGSS Queer Studies concentration.



Anne M. Semlak Memorial Scholarship: Nastasha Powers, a single mother of two boys, began to study criminal justice sciences at ISU. She knew from her first victimology class with Dr. Shelly Clevenger that she would be working

with survivors throughout her career. Her passion grew after continuing her studies in London and France in the spring of 2019. When she returned, she worked as an intern at the YWCA Stepping Stones Rape Crisis Center.



WGSS Student Achievement Awards go to Kimathi Johnson and Rachel Sabella. Johnson is a history major with a double minor in sociology and WGSS. He is also on ISU's track and cross country teams. He posted a series of demands in response to a controversial statement made by the athletic director's 'All Redbird Lives Matter' comment. The demands included a boycott until ISU Athletics actively supported the Black Lives Matter movement, bringing in more people of color in positions of power in mental health



facilities, and a call to diversify athletic trainers at ISU. Sabella graduated this semester with a Bachelor of Arts in anthropology, as well as minors in WGSS, peace and conflict resolution, and Italian studies. She hopes to pursue a Master of Science in resilient and sustainable communities at Prescott College.

Got news?

Send us an email and let us know what you're up to. In town? Stop by and see what we're up to!

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