

Paid Social Work Internships Part 2 FED UP – Beth Wagner, Claire Mancuso, Natalia Norzagaray & Parham Daghighi
Episode 62
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Shimon Cohen:

Welcome to Doin' The Work: Frontline Stories of Social Change, where we bring you stories of real people working to address real issues. I am your host, Shimon Cohen.

In this episode, I talk with Beth Wagner, Claire Mancuso, Natalia Norzagaray, and Parham Daghighi, all MSW students at the University of Texas - Austin and members of the group FED UP, which is organizing for paid social work internships. This episode is Part 2 of a two-part series on social work students organizing for paid internships. They talk about how they created FED UP and how they organize, including how they frame their approach and strategies they use. They also talk about resistance they have faced and how they've responded. The FED UP members share their guiding principles and organizational structure, which are really interesting and can serve as models for others. We break down statements often said from social work administrators and faculty, such as, "Didn't you know what you were getting into?" and "but you're getting an educational experience." The members discuss some of the challenges of unpaid internships for them and their peers, with a focus on how unpaid internships negatively impact students' well-being. We also draw connections to issues of equity in the larger social work profession and how social work is devalued in society. I hope this conversation inspires you to action.

Before we get into the interview, I want to let you all know about our episode's sponsor, the University of Houston Graduate College of Social Work. First off, I want to thank them for sponsoring the podcast. UH has a phenomenal social work program that offers face-to-face master's and doctorate degrees as well as an online and hybrid MSW. They offer one of the country's only political social work programs and an abolitionist focused learning opportunity. Located in the heart of Houston, the program is guided by their bold vision to achieve racial, social, economic, and political justice, local to global. In the classroom and through research, they are committed to challenging systems and reimagining ways to achieve justice and liberation. Go to www.uh.edu/socialwork to learn more. And now, the interview.

Hey, Beth, Parham, Natalia, Claire. So excited to have you all on here. Some of the members of FED UP, really excited. And this is part two of our two-part series on organizing for paid social work student internships. So really excited to have you on all on here. And if you could just start by just briefly introducing yourselves.

Beth Wagner:

Sure. I can go first. My name is Beth Wagner. I'm originally from Maryland. I'm now on my final year of the two-year masters in social work at the University of Texas, Austin, where we're all students. And what else? I'm a plant lover. I love organizing and I'm also the student council president for the master's program. I'll pass it to Parham.

Parham Daghighi:

Hey, Shimon, thanks for having us. I'm Parham Daghighi. I'm a second year MSW student here at UT Austin. I'm a three-year student, so I'm in my second year of three, which means first year of my internship. I have all sorts of hobbies and interests, but actually what I'm most interested in is getting students to get paid for their internships. So I'll pass it on to Natalia.

Natalia Norzagaray:

Hey you all, it's Natalia. I am also a three-year student at UT Austin. It's been a long time. I'm ready to get out of here. I'm pretty FED UP, but I don't know. I like my dog. I love my dog and I hang out with him all the time. I'm from El Paso, I'm actually in El Paso right now. So I grew up in the border. Border child. Great to be here.

Claire Mancuso:

Alright. And my name is Claire Mancuso, and I'm in my final year of the two-year MSW program at UT Austin, Steve Hicks School of Social Work. I really love community building. I have a passion for organizing. I love my sweet cat and I am just so happy and proud to be here to talk about what we've been doing. It's a real honor.

Shimon Cohen:

Thank you all so much. Like I said, I'm super excited to have you on here and for people following along, either listening or reading the transcript, just want to encourage you to go back and listen to part one of this series with Ari and Matt who are Michigan students. Well now they're graduated. But they are part of Payment for Placements, which started at Michigan and now is a national movement that my understanding is FED UP is connected with. So that's why we wanted to do this part two and really get into what you all have been doing in Texas at your program. So just to start off, my first question would be how did you all as FED UP, or to form FED UP, come together and start working on this issue of unpaid social work student internships?

Beth Wagner:

Yeah, so it's amazing to be part of the Payment for Placements movement. As you mentioned, we are a chapter, but our story started somewhat differently. So we have a different name because we started in parallel with the national movement. So we got started originally, I can speak for myself, when I came into the social work program, I understood that there was a practicum requirement, but I didn't realize that we were going to be working two to five full days a week for the duration of the program equivalent to \$20,000 of unpaid labor. And something we hear a lot in this work is, "Well, didn't you know what you were getting into?" And no, I couldn't have imagined that this was the expectation, especially seeing the stress that it has put onto all of us. So waking up to the reality that we were really working for free in an institutionalized sense, I think it stirred a lot of us in the wrong way.

And this is definitely an issue that is widely and deeply felt among the student body. And we know that because even before FED UP existed, students were organizing on this issue. And one of the first things we did, so we had been discussing this in class our first semester in the program and hearing some of the rumblings from other students. And so the first thing we did was get in touch with the MSW students who were getting ready to graduate and the BSW students who had previously organized a petition around this issue in order to not reinvent the wheel. We wanted to build on all of the hard work that had been done and it was really important and encouraging for us that many students felt the same way about this. So beginning in our second semester of the program, or at least my second semester, we have an assignment in our field class, which is to create an advocacy project, which is interesting, kind of a canned advocacy project.

And I'm not sure that they knew what they were getting, or they ultimately wanted what they got, but several of us decided to make this issue of unpaid internships at the University of Texas, Austin, our advocacy project. And so that's kind of how we formed this wave of the movement, which is on the shoulders of many other movements as most movements are. We understand that it takes change. And

so yeah, we got started in February of 2022 with this round of efforts. There was also faculty who had encouraged us to organize. We had expressed our displeasure and they had encouraged us to come with solutions. And also COVID-19, especially for the cohorts that came before us, was a catalyst for many people. Suddenly there is no in class component, you can't work in person with people and there was no, a serious lack of support for students and no financial compensation for an extremely financially taxing situation.

So I think that was also a catalyst for some of this movement. And so in speaking with the former organizers from the previous waves, we learned about some of the barriers that had led to some of these efforts ultimately dying out. So the first is that people graduate. We work with undergraduates and graduate students. Graduate students have two, maybe three years max in the program. And there is definitely a wait-it-out attitude. We were advised early on that they're going to try and push the can down the road and wait us out. And so early on when we were planning how to do this, we wanted to make sure our movement would be sustainable beyond our time here. And another was that students were just becoming completely burned out and didn't have the capacity to carry this heavy burden forward against the current, which is ultimately what student organizing and most organizing is.

And so another core part of our organizing ethos was centering the well-being of everybody involved. And so that manifested into some guiding principles. So we coalesced around a simple mission, which is universal fair pay stipends for everyone. And we were advised on that in conversation with the students at Michigan. So we found out about the Payment for Placement program on Reddit. We reached out, Matt came and met with us, spoke with us, and just the national network and the ability to be inspired by other people to hear, "This is not right, this is a huge problem, and here's what's worked for us, here's how we suggest approaching it." It was extremely helpful early on. And we've had the honor of helping other chapters get started in the same way now.

And then we are structured differently than some other chapters. So we went with a flat organizational structure so we all would refer to ourselves probably as core organizers. No one person is in charge. We have different roles and that's important for us for many reasons, but also for sustainability. So all of us have flowed out at different times because flow in and flow out is a core guiding principle. So when it becomes too much, we can set it down and we share the burden. And in a program where there's a "head down, push through, it's miserable, but it's going to end mentality" that's really regressive and it really stifles people's ability and energy to create change.

And so we wanted to organize and move in a completely different way. And the fact that we were a flat organization and decentralized freaked the administration out, which was surprising to us. We just naturally are working as a community. We're also a group of friends, so you can do it and don't worry too much about it. The expected martyrdom within the social work profession, we had to overcome a lot of that and we started very intentionally with how we structure ourselves. So I think I'll pass it on to Natalia to see if you have anything else to add on that question.

Natalia Norzagaray:

I think for me personally, it was a deeper layer of this mindset shift that had to occur for me, being like a, children of immigrants, coming to a big institution, going to UT, being from El Paso, was this huge achievement. And I was told that it was a privilege and that it was something that you should be taking advantage of. So it's like this added layer of just put your head down, get through it, but as soon as you realize that hey, this is a struggle. These are three years of your life that you're just going to be working. At some points, I've worked three jobs and then had my classes and the internship. So it's a lot to manage, it's a lot to handle. So really when I got introduced to the movement by my fellow peers, by

other students that were advocating for it, they helped me switch that mindset, find that strength to advocate for myself regardless of the social expectations that I had coming into higher education.

Shimon Cohen:

All of that's really amazing to me on a bunch of levels. Natalia, thank you for sharing that and being vulnerable about that. And I think there is this attitude in society at large around when you get access to these institutions or resources that didn't exist before or parents didn't have, or grandparents didn't have, or peers don't have, it can just be like, "No, you just have to appreciate it or something and not criticize it." But it's like, "No, this isn't right." And if any profession should be teaching about advocating about what's right, it's social work. So maybe some others like public policy or law, some other ones too that obviously come together.

And then Beth, with what you're saying, what really sticks out to me, a lot of it did, but some stuff made me think about, did you all have organizing experience because of some of the things you're talking about, a flat structure, this flow in, flow out, wanting longevity, wanting something that's going to be sustaining because that is one of the biggest issues of students graduating and administrators know it, faculty know it, it gets talked about. It's not just some random thing that happens, right? It is a strategic thing of passing it on until the "troublemakers" leave. So did you have organizing experience I guess would be my first question and then if you didn't, how did you figure some of this stuff out?

Beth Wagner:

So yes, I did have organizing experience. So after I graduated from college, I lived in DC for six years, and for the last four of those years I was involved in community housing organizing. And most recently the year before I came to UT, I was supporting a group of residents who were resisting this placement project funded by the DC government at Brooklyn Manor. And I think in that sense I learned a lot from the people who mentored me, the community leaders, the residents who led with community care and love and providing a foundation for people to exist and be okay so that they can organize.

And I think that ethos has come through in FED UP in a way that is organic and contributed to by all of us. But I also learned what not to do, which was I burnt myself to a crisp, didn't delegate, took it to heart and doubted myself. And definitely personally, I wanted to do things in a different way because I saw that that wasn't a sustainable way to organize. And we were lucky that many of us do have organizing experience and also our flat structure means that we discuss everything. And so organizing experience or not, the strategy is decided collectively in a way that I think has been a real asset to the movement.

Parham Daghighi:

And as somebody with, well, to Beth's point, there's a huge diversity of experiences and among the people in our group and the students that are doing this work, and I happen to represent one of, one among that group that was coming in with basically no organizing experience, none formally. I mean I have my own convictions and values and all of that and the work that FED UP's doing happens to align really nicely with that. But in terms of actual organizing experience, I came in with basically nothing, like a blank slate. And again, it's that flat structure that really I think really, really encourages an environment where we are all learning from each other all the time. So there's not those who have organizing experience dictating what to do to those who don't or whatnot. It's a very organic process and I feel like I've learned a lot over the last year because of that.

Shimon Cohen:

That's awesome. It's really incredible. It makes me think about how does it compare to some of what you're learning in your classes around advocacy.

[Group laughter]

Claire, you were going to add?

Claire Mancuso:

Yeah, I'll also hop in. I also had a organizing experience, specifically student organizing experience at my alma mater, Northeastern University. Shout out to Huskies Organizing With Labor or HOWL, that is where the seeds of my organizer identity were planted. But I will also say that just because I had organizing experience didn't mean that I was the best or the most well suited for every situation because my organization had a super confrontational approach. It wasn't in a social work environment.

And even though a lot of what is good about this movement is that it refuses to yield to that niceness and niceness culture, there were other folks who weren't as accustomed to that confrontational style who were really more suited to a lot of situations or to a lot of outreach or use different language that is more suited to social work, more suited to Texas. Whereas I was organizing in Boston, Massachusetts. Folks have a different sensibility up there. Even though myself, I am from Texas, that is where I developed my organizer identity. So I think that the lesson is that regardless of whether or not you've ever considered yourself an organizer, you bring so much to the work. So once you start organizing even a little bit, congratulations, you're an organizer.

Natalia Norzagaray:

I think something that I will add to that is just that going into this organizing work really elevated my whole social work experience. I did not know anything about organizing. I had never done it before like Parham, but it really showed me what type of social work I wanted to see out there. It was completely different, something that we weren't being taught, I think, intentionally, but it really changed everything. It took it to a whole 'nother level and it added this element of community and friendship that was unmatched.

Shimon Cohen:

So you all have taken this unjust, oppressive experience and turned it into a strength in terms of a learning opportunity, community, and things like that. But obviously it shouldn't have to be that way. But I think that just speaks to the strength of your movement and what you're doing. And it also speaks to the deficiencies within social work education because why does it take this to be learning all this? All this could have been in your classes and you could have had an equitable educational experience. And when I say you, I'm speaking obviously with the four of you, but this is students across the country. And so I do want to go back to something you said, Beth, and obviously we can all talk about it because you said something really important, you said a lot of really important things, but there's some things that, and before we started recording, we talked a little bit too about some of these things that get said within social work education.

So one of the things you said is people said, "Didn't you know what you were getting into?" And I've heard that a hundred percent and from the faculty side, which I'm not faculty anymore, but I was, and there's reasons people can listen or check out my social media of why I'm not currently faculty, but it's because of my organizing. And I've heard these things said and I've even heard it where it's like, "Oh, you just have to prepare the students that this is going to be how it is, the more information they have

ahead of time." And so I just want to break that quote down, "Didn't you know what you were getting into?" So what does that mean? So if you knew what you were getting into then what is that? So you wouldn't do social work? So does social work not want people who want to get paid?

[Group laughter]

I mean this has been a theme that comes up in multiple podcast episodes I've done, but this is the gatekeeping aspect of social work of who gets to be a social worker. And we got into this last episode in part one, but you mentioned \$20,000 of unpaid labor, you're also paying for those credits. So it's not just 20,000 you're losing, it's a lot more because it's all those credits. So when someone says that, "Didn't you know what you were getting into?" Let's break that down. What are they saying?

Parham Daghighi:

Yeah, I think they're saying a lot. For me, this even kind of analyzing what that means and everything that it implies, what's tacit, what's explicit, all of that, you can consider that without intentionality of what that person necessarily, they're— It's like they're a vehicle for something that's actually a much more pervasive message, which is at its core, it's like you need to learn now not to value yourself in a very particular way. So don't expect too much. Something like that. I think it starts from there. I mean, I feel like I have a lot more to that I can say about it, but it's taken the form for me of guidance language too, which is to say when I was in the program or coming from people who themselves probably went through similar circumstances albeit in the past when the cost of education was cheaper, which is an important point that everybody seems to forget, but something to the effect of, "Well yeah, it was a grind. I went through that too. We all do. And you can really do it."

So it has this edge of, what's the word, encouragement. Like, "Students come to me at the end of their internship and they're like, 'I have no idea how I did it, but I did it.'" And that's like a win or something. And that's nice. On the surface, it's a nice story or something. But that student was grinding, they were probably grinding themselves down to a pulp or burnt themselves to a crisp like Beth said. And it doesn't have to be that way.

Natalia Norzagaray:

I don't know if you really know what you're getting yourself into until you experience the whole thing. You see it in theory. There's this many hours, whatever, whatever. But once you're in it, it's not cool. It's not something that should be done that way. And just because as they say it's education and you're getting something out of it, I mean I really am only getting a certain percentage out of it because for most of the time I'm exhausted.

Beth Wagner:

And I would say we're paying to work for free. Whether we knew that in advance or we're just finding out now, can we agree it's a problem. Having to work an unpaid internship is for some people not getting paid for, that means they have to work two jobs instead of one or three jobs instead of two, counting this unpaid internship. And basically where we ultimately needed to coalesce with the administration was we did research, which I know we're going to get to, and we centered our argument at UT around student well-being because students are in acute economic and emotional distress. And so to me, when someone says, "Well, didn't you know what you were getting yourself into?" Or like, "You should be grateful for this educational opportunity or experience," as was said, to me, they're saying, "Just sit down, shut up. Don't try and create change in this institution," which has an incentive not to change.

And what it feels like is "We don't care about you." And nothing has created more tension with the administration for us than when we express the fact that we don't feel cared for. Because the story the administration has told themselves is they're doing everything they can and they do care about us. And that's why we as students who are rooted in love for each other have to say it is not acceptable full stop.

Shimon Cohen:

When you're saying all that, it makes me think about how this is a huge problem in social work education and then this is the larger institution of social work where people get paid horrific salaries, people who have a master's degree, who have gone through what you all are going through and spent all that money. I mean the return on investment is terrible and then the caseloads are extremely high. So it's a prep in a twisted way for that of "Well, didn't you know what you were getting into," not just with these unpaid internships and social work, but to be a social worker, this is what it's going to be, "Didn't you know what you were getting into?" And that's still really based in this White middle class, upper middle class privileged people doing charity with the unprivileged, right? We're not going to say oppressed, we're not going to say marginalized, we're going to say unprivileged or whatever the word is, masses or something. And so we see this is how it's like is still that mentality and that approach is just very pervasive to this day.

Parham Daghighi:

Totally. I think it's an indoctrination. I mean straight up, that's how I see it. And it doesn't take explicitly unjust or cruel or bad people to uphold that kind of thinking. All it takes is people who either whose career and salaries depend on maintaining, towing that line or people who just make excuses for it, any number of things. So it's not really about nefarious individual agents at all. It's a culture and it's a culture that teaches us as students from an early point to undervalue ourselves.

Beth Wagner:

And I do want to say we have been fortunate to receive support from members of faculty and staff, including Jennifer Luna who runs the career center at UT. She was talking about this alongside the time we were talking about it because when you don't value, you're taught not to value yourself, how can you negotiate for a fair salary? If you have no savings, how can you hold out for a job that you really want or a job that can pay you what you're worth? And it depresses the wages for the entire profession. So I do want to say though, we do have to make this case, we do have to continue to make this case, sadly, but there are people, there are many people who look at the research, they look at the facts, they understand and they do want to see this change. So we're grateful for every one of you out there.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, no, that's a really good point. And it's systemic. Like you said, this isn't about individuals. I mean obviously individuals also hold up the system, but one person, two people can't make the larger systemic changes that need to be made, which is why what you all are doing as this movement is so impressive to me. And what I said to Matt and Arie because it is, these types of changes historically also have always come from student movements because you're all the ones feeling it, you're all the ones most invested in it. So let's talk about that. Let's talk about some of the strategies you've used along the way.

Claire Mancuso:

So we have built on the previous efforts of the proto FED UP movement. So the petition from the BSW students, that's another case of there being a stereotype about your conventional BSW student. Maybe they're getting help from their parents, maybe they had a certain amount of money saved for college and they had an unpaid internship planned. And what you see is there's a lot of unconventional or "non-traditional students" who don't fit that profile and who simply can't manage. So while we're all MSW students, a lot of these efforts and the foundation of these efforts have been built by the BSWs. So I want to make sure that they're named. So after that petition got a lot of signatures and a bunch of people in the program were like, "Okay, what's next?" FED UP crystallized through in a bunch of different kind of independent ways.

But I think for Beth and I, it was through our advocacy project and our practice class and we looked at each other and we said, "Well, if we can't advocate for ourselves, how are we going to advocate for anybody else?" And we did a lot of preliminary research getting to use that assignment as an opportunity to research what it would look like to organize within our program. And when we got in touch with the Payment of Placements movement, the Michigan people, Matt and Arie, who are now our dear comrades, they recommended doing a student survey to get a lay of the land and get our hand on the pulse of our program because we certainly know our experience, but there was a lot more to learn about the diversity of experience within the MSW and BSW programs.

And my first experience with student organizing taught me that being an organizer is just bringing your personal experience and skills to the cause, making your small contribution to the collective. And I said, "Hey, my background is in survey research." So I just kind of, you know, they say, "Just start." We just started, we started building this financial hardship survey to zero in on the relationship between field, the economic and emotional and holistic spiritual toll of unpaid or underpaid field internship work on our students. And as someone who's been doing survey research, I was blown away at the response.

We got about 120 responses across both at BSW and MSW programs. And we learned so much in terms of just the raw data and also the free response testimony that people provided gave us that quantitative piece as well as that powerful qualitative piece like the power of story and its ability to impact how admin, our fellow students and our allies, various stakeholders perceive our plight as student interns, unpaid workers, not employees, but somehow the floor of the social safety net in this city. But beyond the survey and the data we got from it, community building, and making sure that we're having fun, making sure that the revolution is irresistible as they say. So we do cute things like having a potting table outside at the end of the year where everyone can pot some succulents and get to know each other and casually talk about the movement while we're doing this relaxing regulating enjoyable thing. We had an ice cream social at orientation at the beginning of the semester.

We set up a clothing swap in our student lounge for folks to be able to get free business casual clothing for their internships because that's a huge expense for students not having the right or enough suitable clothes to wear to their internships that aren't paid. I've certainly have gotten some great clothes from the clothing swap, so it's directly benefited me. I think Beth is also wearing a shirt she got from the clothing swap. But after the success of that clothing swap, it became a permanent fixture in our student lounge. So there's always a reminder of FED UP's presence in the common social space in the school. So making our presence known in a way that offers a material benefit to our classmates. Take a piece of clothing, leave a piece of clothing, take what you need because this is ultimately a movement about taking care of each other.

We've had socials and parties to celebrate all of our hard work and our progress. Celebrating the small wins is always huge, whether it be just amongst us in the ways that we celebrate as core organizers or on social media. And we also just held our first FED UP retreat for the core organizers to reflect at a

deeper spiritual level about the sacred work of collective action and organizing and how we're connecting this to the social work that we want to see, how we're modeling the social work that we want to see within our organization by caring for each other so deeply as people.

In addition to community building, we have outreach. So we've been invited by many faculty members to give presentations on this issue in their classes. We have a lot of faculty allies who see how students are struggling and who are heartened at seeing students advocate for themselves and want more of their students to get involved or at least be informed about what's going on in FED UP. And it got to the point where we were presenting in classes in the BSW and MSW level and we'd start with saying, "Who's heard of FED UP?" And every single person would raise their hand because- We're kind of a big deal.

[Group laughter]

Shimon Cohen:

That's awesome.

Claire Mancuso:

Because we've been putting in that work, but also because it resonates so deeply with each and every one of our classmates. And then Natalia, who is fabulous, has run our social media and has been really smart about the information we share, how we publicize wins, advertise actions and social events. And lastly, we've collaborated. So we've collaborated with other organizations who are sympathetic to us. The NASW Texas very early on provided vocal and material support for us. So we were actually the first state sponsorship for the movement because NASW Texas wanted to be on the right side. We also collaborated with Underpaid at UT, which is a student organization that works around chronic underpay because we cannot strike here as students in Texas. We're in a really different political environment than our friends at Michigan. So we have to use really unconventional methods when it comes to labor stuff, especially as students. Teachers can't strike either. That's a fun fact.

And then just relying on the core P4P national fellow chapters and core organizers and using the handbook and making sure we're never on an island over here at UT. We have so many comrades and so many people who want to help and offer insight. So the national meetings have been great for that. Yeah, just keeping really diverse and accessible ways to get involved. Super, super light touch, be it signing our statement of support, just coming to our informational meetings that are not organizing meetings. They're just standing Wednesday meetings in the student lounge saying, "Here's what's up with FED UP. If you want to get involved, here's some options. If you just want some information, here's a little slide deck saying what we've been up to and what our progress has been. And some places that we're stuck and we're working around."

So making small to no commitment asks for people who are so overloaded or afraid of getting involved because they don't know if they can handle it. It's such a social work thing, but they want to help so badly, but they don't want to disappoint anyone. So making it really clear to our peers that we have a flow in, flow out model and you don't have to flow in at all to provide your support in a core organizing capacity. And then lastly, I think using our relationships with admin on a casual level, relationship maintenance with faculty allies has been big. Faculty who are sympathetic want to help us. They're also constrained in various ways. So maintaining relationships with them casually and cultivating those relationships for when they can come in handy later on. I won't get more specific than that. But I would say to people who are thinking about organizing, look for your allies in your program and cultivate those

relationships because you never know who has handy dandy information or skills or things to contribute to your movement, even if they can't vocally say they support you.

Shimon Cohen:

You all have been doing a lot. And I love the part about we're a big deal. It's like, yeah, look at all the work you've been doing. You're really embedded everywhere. Everyone feels your presence. And I've never met a social work student who was like, "Oh no, I don't want a paid internship." Every social work student wants a paid... I mean most students period want paid internships if they're going to have an internship. I want to talk about your wins. Let's talk about what are some of the wins that you've had.

Beth Wagner:

Yeah, I'll be brief and summarize up where we stand now. So all of the things that Claire described are ways that we have generated awareness, momentum, collective support in order to basically demand that the administration take us seriously. And so we have been pushing towards a joint task force at our school, we call it a working group, following in the trajectory of what Michigan has done as well. And that has resulted in us for the last semester meeting around the table with the dean of the school, the dean of the field program, and basically everyone who has decision making power over this issue at our school. And in that space over time, we have developed a collaborative working relationship, which has led to some changes, which I'm thrilled to be able to share. So first of all, we are discussing with the administration, reducing the hours requirements for the MSW and BSW programs.

They are currently above what is required by the CSWE accreditation by about 140 hours for the MSW program. So significant amount of time. So we're looking to reconcile that down to the base requirement. It may take a few years as we gradually step it down in order to ensure that everybody hits their hours, but full transparency about what's actually required in terms of hours and an ultimate reduction to the bare minimum is something that we have common ground with the administration on. And so we're excited about that. We presented at the NASW State Conference on unpaid internships down in Galveston in October. So it's exciting. We presented on national panels with NASW on this issue alongside students from other schools at the national movement. There is a statewide working group within Texas that's facilitated by the NASW that FED UP members sit on.

And then we— other have smaller changes, which we're hoping will bleed into larger ones. So we have secured stipend negotiation coaching for students from the career counseling center. So helping students be prepared in order to speak to the need for a stipend. Obviously, the burden shouldn't be on individuals, it's a systemic issue. But equipping us to value ourselves, it does help and it is an important kind of training. Inclusion of stipend education and negotiation in the training for field instructors. So the sites that are going to be hosting the internships. So that will be coming from the administration rather than from us. We've secured an extension in the time that you have in order to complete your hours requirements, which makes it easier for students to work while we're paying to work for free. And then we have also achieved common ground when we're talking about resources.

So our administration doesn't want to talk about stipends and they treat conversations about labor like the third rail. And so in order to advance our common cause without sacrificing anything that we believe in, we've just started to talk about scholarships with the administration because what's fundamentally important to us is moving resources. And so part of a recent gift, which I think will be announced publicly as substantial seven figure gift, our hope is that money will be channeled towards students who are later in the program rather than just used to recruit students into the program, and then students later in the later years are left without financial support.

So we want to move that money from upfront in order to really fully support students who are working full-time or close to full-time. And we're also looking at students who are interning at UT. We've secured commitment from the administration to continue to look at how we can get students who are working for UT for their internships paid or access to benefits, like health insurance or free parking. And then finally we want to see an endowed fund. We don't have common ground on this yet, but we want to see the first endowed fund in the country for field stipends so that every student can have fair pay stipend.

Shimon Cohen:

That's all phenomenal. I mean those are huge achievements and I don't know where you all find the time to do all this work on top of everything else you have going on because what you've done and what you've been able to achieve and what you are setting up also, which I do have a question about that of what's going to happen because you all are graduating relatively soon, so how that's going to get continued. But I do want to just before we get into that, some of the different ways student paid student internships could happen. We did talk about also in part one, just larger all sorts of different strategies and you're adding some additional ones too. And then I think one thing that I didn't mention in part one is there's also federal work study and I don't know how much programs are using that. I haven't heard of it in a long time. So I don't know nationally what folks are talking about if you've heard things about that. But it seems like another area where funding could come from.

Parham Daghighi:

Yeah, I would definitely agree. I think in the case of our program in particular, at least in one of the working group meetings that we've had with our administration there, I got the sense that there are conversations about expanding the federal work study program and making it more accessible to students in our program. I think that's maybe one of the things that probably has a lot of variety across different social work programs around the country. But it's not something I haven't heard anything about. So it could be an area to leverage. So thanks for bringing that up actually.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, and I think you all brought up a really good point too that's different from the folks in Michigan is they've gotten some state legislation passed. Well, Michigan is a different political situation than Texas. And you're saying some of the organizing challenges within Texas that come up. So I've been in some meetings about paid student internships with some national NASW folks because I was trying to do some organizing on this in Florida and then connecting it to national at one point. And we were talking about that there's been some different bills for federal— The issue's always going to be where's this money going to come from.

So as these conversations have happened talking about where's this money going to come from, you bring up some good points because a lot of this is going to be that some states will pass legislation, but then for those of us in states where it's highly unlikely that the state is going to pass it, I hope that as a movement, as a larger movement, we can work to federal legislation. It just seems like there's workforce development. The need has been made very clear, especially with the pandemic, that social workers are at a really high need. Mental health is at a high need and there are plenty of people who want to be social workers, but there's this major barrier, which is how much it costs to get the degree and what you have to go through to get it with these unpaid internships.

Claire Mancuso:

Yeah, I would say that's something that's really encouraging and the status of this is I think still TBD, but the US Appropriations Committee did make a recommendation that the Department of Education pilot a new work study program to cover all work study eligible MSW students who are doing an internship. So there is someone in Washington in our corner who's paying attention to these workforce issues, are making recommendations in the omnibus. And yeah, ultimately, I mean Beth and I have talked about this, we would love to see something like what had to happen with medical residency. That's federal money that MDs or medical students do when they're completing their residency because ultimately this is an issue of lost wages.

This is an issue of at least nine hundred, but typically over a thousand hours in lost wages, which in social work, if we're being honest, you'll never make up really. So using the language of labor and insisting on it, no matter how many times the CSWE says that field internship and field practicum is learning not labor, it starts to stick. It started to stick in our program. It'll start to stick in yours if you're listening because you're a social worker, you're a worker, and Texas needs behavioral health workers, Texas needs social workers, and whether or not these changes in this money comes from the state or the federal level, this movement's I think here to stay. I feel confident that that's true.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, this is a labor issue, which Matt and Arie did talk about how some of their strongest work has come through working with the graduate union at the University of Michigan. And I know Representative Barbara Lee has had the Reinvest in Social Work Act presented at different times, which, it would be something, it still doesn't go far enough because it doesn't cover all students who need it, but it's a step in the right direction. There's just lots of different ways. NASW, when those of us who are members, and yes, I am still a paying member, it's been off and on over the years, but when we go to submit our membership to renew the membership or when you go to get it the first time, there's different little funds that you can add more money to.

And there could be a student internship fund that a lot of people would probably be willing to give to because they know how hard it was and they wish they had one. So I think we've got to go after everything that exists, but it is going to be a fundamental shift in how social work is viewed as a profession. And I think that is one of the strongest things your movement is putting forth around well-being. And we deserve to be valued and compensated for the work we do. Just everyone else should be. But I mean, people have a master's degree and are making less than someone with a bachelor's degree that graduates from with a different major.

Claire Mancuso:

But we didn't do it for the money.

[Group laughter]

Shimon Cohen:

What's that line? "Didn't do it for the income, do it for the outcome." I hate that.

Beth Wagner:

Yeah. It can be exhausting to hear these things said to us, thrown back into our faces as we're struggling and it can cause a person to doubt themselves. I have doubted my own conviction because I am up against the administration who's constantly telling me the opposite and being rooted in a community

that can remind you, "No, no, this is important. We're on the right track." And also I go back and I read the testimony, I read what people said and we are conduits for the broader student voice. And one of the testimonies talked about the martyrdom that is expected of people who want to help. And I was like, wow, that has really stuck with me, and who loses when we martyr ourselves are our clients. That's why self-care is an ethical requirement and it's impossible to self-care when you're under economic duress.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, Beth, I think that's really important of this self-doubt thing. And what you're doing organizing and you know this from your history with tenant right organizing and housing organizing right is anytime you're organizing you're up against these much larger systems that are so deeply entrenched in the dominant culture that's in our faces all the time, it takes a lot of inner strength to go up against that day after day. I mean, a lot of it for some folks, it's going up against everything we've been taught that we're supposed to value and try to achieve in life. And so I think you really hit a critical point of community, of the power of community to be there for each other, lift each other up, be like, "No, what you're doing is right. You're not crazy." It can feel that way at times. So I really appreciate you saying that.

Parham Daghighi:

Can I second that? I just want to just add, because that point is so critical that it's really, really, really essential like when you tap into to those who is going to be trying to get into this kind of work in their own school or whatever or any other organizing work, that aspect that that cannot be accessed outside of the power of a will to community and of creating community. There's literally nothing that replaces that because just like Beth said so nicely, and you just said, Shimon, when you challenge the dominant structures, when you poke the bear, there's like every trick in the book and every strategy in the book that are first and foremost designed to make you doubt yourself and they're effective too. So having the community to come back to and to affirm you and to help you self-affirming when you re-enter those spaces, which are challenging, especially when people have smiles on their faces, have smiles on their faces, but are telling you no basically, or telling you you're wrong. It's really, really important to have community with you in those spaces.

Shimon Cohen:

Yeah, like what Claire was saying about niceness culture. It's like "We'll smile at you as we oppress you."

Claire Mancuso:

We were told to change our name by actually pretty well-intentioned folks who were advising us when we were getting started and FED UP actually does stand for something. It's Field Education and Development Undergraduate and Graduate Placements, but it means FED UP and that's what we mean, and we weren't going to change it. And we said, "Thank you for the feedback. I know that that might not be the most social worky way to express ourselves, but we're here because we're saying social work needs to change and we're really FED UP."

Shimon Cohen:

So it should be like "We're upset that we're paying for free labor." I mean, what should it be called?

Parham Daghighi:

"Grateful and hopeful for gradual change across time with the least amount of problems for anybody involved and everybody gets to maintain all of their privilege and everything's going to be okay."

Shimon Cohen:

That is awesome.

Parham Daghighi:

We can make an acronym out of that. It should be that.

Shimon Cohen:

That was so good.

Beth Wagner:

It resonates with the intended audience. I think Natalia said yesterday that if it wasn't called FED UP, not everybody would know about it.

Natalia Norzagaray:

Yeah, I think it was important for us to stick to that name because otherwise it wouldn't make the rumbles that it's been making. Every other org has this acronym that's hard to say or hard to remember, but we're here to stay and we're here to make a difference. So yeah, we're just FED UP.

Shimon Cohen:

I love the name. I think it's great. I'm glad you stuck with it and didn't take the well-intentioned advice. I want to get into lessons learned. But before we do that, to wrap up, I also want to ask, so how's this going to sustain when you all graduate?

Natalia Norzagaray:

We're already working to pass on the torch, as you might say. Parham, thankfully is going to stick around for a little bit, sadly, but gladly. And I think it's going to be, with the flat structure, it's already set up for it to be passed on very seamlessly. It's a lot of planning to make sure that there are people that can handle it and that can continue the work and take it further. And obviously we've invested so much into this.

Personally, it's going to take a lot of me having to do the termination work of this is something that I have been working on for almost a year, and it's something I hold really closely to my heart at this point. So if I can do some of the work at the alumni level, I will do that. But yeah, I think with the care that we put into it, we care about our students, we care about each other, so it's important for us to really strategically lay the groundwork for that and the administration at our school at least I think they know that we are here to stay. So if that collaboration continues, which it will, we're going to be a longstanding thing. And then with the national movement, I mean even better.

Shimon Cohen:

That's awesome. Yeah, I mean, the alumni aspect is so critical and because a lot of students do graduate and then move on because they get busy with their careers and lives and everything, but being able to

remain involved and then, like you said, this national movement, people don't have to be students to be involved. And there's other aspects for like you got great support from your NASW state chapter, but let's try to do stuff with NASW national or other national... I mean, NASW really is the biggest national organization that really could elevate this. I think that was the theme from last year's social work month was elevate social work and it's like, yeah, let's elevate paid internships. So what about lessons learned?

Natalia Norzagaray:

We've already mentioned a lot about our lessons learned, but I think, yeah, just going again with it's okay to not be nice. We are in Texas, there's this expected decorum that you have to have of southern hospitality. But I mean with that strength that I had to build in within me of, it's okay, I'm a soft-spoken person, I'm a nice person, but I also have scruples and I also can do a lot with my niceness. I had to be strategic with, I have a GA position within the administration. And using those relationships to my advantage was really critical so that I could make some moves and I don't know what it might sound like, but it's just being nice will not get you as far as being headstrong and committed.

So that was one of the biggest lessons I think, in holding each other together and having those moments to check in after every working group meeting to really deliberate and decompress and have that togetherness feeling of, yeah, we did that and this one didn't go that great. How can we do better? How can we achieve a better outcome with a different strategy? It was a lot of going back and forth and we learn something new every time. So I think it's just in those conversations that we have with each other and then in the conversations that we have with important constituents, and there's so many lessons that have come out of this. I don't know if anyone wants to add anything else.

Parham Daghighi:

I wanted to add that this has been a long and multifaceted process of going from the very beginning to now having a formalized working group with our administration that's going quite well actually. And having wins coming out of that and things on the horizon, formally designating ourselves as a student organization. All of that has taken a ton of time and effort and blood, sweat, and tears and all of that, including some really challenging moments, some moments where with a lot of negative tensions and all of that stuff. A lesson that I've learned is that even though those can be uncomfortable or whatnot, they're opportunities actually, you can do every single thing that comes up in this work as an opportunity, whether it be an opportunity for you to learn what's the true face of something that's presents itself as fully caring for you or wants to care or hears you and all of that. Or whether it's about learning something about yourself, like how you do under certain circumstances. Yeah, just wanted to reiterate this work is full of opportunities for growth.

Beth Wagner:

Yeah, I have two quick ones to add. The first one I would say is do not unnecessarily push the pace. It's a long game. Don't rush it. There's no need. Just do it in a time that feels possible. I think the other one is focus on the material changes. It can be very easy to lose your way in the mix of conversations, pushback, what people say. And we had to explain to our administration that care is not a feeling. Care is an action. And the care that we are concerned about is evident. It's manifest in the movement of resources that make people's lives better. And so keeping laser focused on that. And then the last one is just what a gift it has been to be so different and have different strengths. And so when I can't speak the Texas talk here, I can't, I'm too direct and it doesn't serve the movement. I have people that's around me that can do this, and that is a gift. And that's why you organize in groups and I'm very grateful for all of that.

Shimon Cohen:

That's awesome. I love the lessons learned and yeah, you shared a lot of them as we were talking, and I'm glad we were going to end with that. And the work you all are doing is super impressive and just gives me tons of hope, and I'm excited to see what comes of it. I mean, we're all connected now on social media. Of course. We're going to include in the show notes ways that folks can get connected who are listening. And also, again, there's the Payment for Placements episode from last month. So to get connected to the national movement, we'll put that in here too. And I just really want to thank you all for coming on the podcast and for doin' the work.

Parham Daghighi:

Thank you, Shimon. It was a pleasure to be here.

Beth Wagner:

Thank you so much.

Parham Daghighi:

Yeah. To everybody listening, get in touch with us.

Beth Wagner:

Yeah, follow us on Instagram @utfedup.

Claire Mancuso:

Or email us at utfedup@gmail.com.

Beth Wagner:

Thank you, Shimon, for all you do.

Shimon Cohen:

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