

2026 Banded Dissertation Defense Day Schedule and Program

April 2026 | All MN Central Time | Zoom link: <https://stthomas.zoom.us/j/8051839544>
 Doctor of Social Work, School of Social Work | Morrison Family College of Health

Click on Banded Dissertation Titles to view Abstract
 Last revised February 12, 2026

Tuesday, April 21				
Time	Student	State	BD Title	Supervising Professor
12:30 pm	Amanda R. Thooft	MN	Supervision Matters: Shaping Competent and Confident Social Workers	Robin Whitebird, Ph.D., MSW, LISW
1:40 pm	Rachel Dumas Babbitt	MN	Systemic Community Trauma: Leveraging Community Engagement to Empower Communities	Robin Whitebird, Ph.D., MSW, LISW
2:50 pm	Britt P. Olean	MN	The Powerhouse of Connection: Fostering Security and Achievement through Relational Engagement	Kingsley Chigbu, Ph.D., MSW, CFNIP, LICSW
Wednesday, April 22				
Time	Student	State	BD Title	Supervising Professor
12:30 pm	Becky Doane	MI	Expanding the Biosocial Theory: The Connection Between Sensory and Emotion Dysregulation in Borderline Personality Disorder	Kingsley Chigbu, Ph.D., MSW, CFNIP, LICSW
1:40 pm	Sarah Langley	MO	From Resources to Inclusion: Supporting Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) People in Missouri Communities and Schools	Robin Whitebird, Ph.D., MSW, LISW
Thursday, April 23				
Time	Student	State	BD Title	Supervising Professor
12:30 pm	Bobbi L. Fields	NC	Assessing and Improving Perinatal Mental Health Screening Through a Culturally Responsive Lens	Robin Whitebird, Ph.D., MSW, LISW
1:40 pm	Caroline Conrad Ban	IN	From Crisis to Crime Scene to Cry for Justice: A Roadmap for Police Social Work	Robin Whitebird, Ph.D., MSW, LISW

Abstracts

In alphabetical order by last name.

Systemic Community Trauma: Leveraging Community Engagement to Empower Communities

Candidate: Rachel Dumas Babbitt

Supervising Professor: Robin Whitebird, Ph.D., MSW, LISW

Community trauma is more than a violent event, and it includes the systematic under-resourcing of a community. This dissertation examines methods for interrupting systemic community trauma through the framework of Adverse Community Experiences and Resilience, which identifies community trauma manifesting across a community's physical, economic, and social elements. First, the concept of community trauma within this system lens is explored, and how community cohesion and engagement can empower communities to interrupt trauma by applying asset-based community development tools. This examination is deepened through a historical, deductive content analysis of three settlement houses and how these programs mitigated the extreme poverty, a form of community trauma, within their communities. The historical analysis identifies the activities of these settlement houses and how they mitigated community trauma through the physical, economic, and social elements of their communities. This analysis identifies the importance of understanding the impact of social connection and engagement in mitigating and interrupting community trauma. The insights from this study support community empowerment and the development of connected communities to mitigate systemic community trauma. The learnings from this dissertation provide recommendations for the social work profession to realign with community engagement, enabling adaptation and flexibility to meet the evolving needs and experiences of communities.

Keywords: community trauma, settlement house, asset-based community development, poverty, empowerment

From Crisis to Crime Scene to Cry for Justice: A Roadmap for Police Social Work

Candidate: Caroline Conrad Ban

Supervising Professor: Robin Whitebird, Ph.D., MSW, LISW

Police social work has recently grown nationwide. For one reason, it is now recognized that most 911 calls concern social issues rather than active crimes. Secondly, some identify it as a practical response to police injustice and a rise in community mental health needs. As society navigates the next era in public safety, communities require better information about this understudied role. Police social work is often characterized as a new profession, but it dates back to the early 1900s. Many make this false assumption due to scant research on the topic and the absence of a standard model for the work. This three-part banded dissertation creates a roadmap for the next generation of police social workers. The first product is an archival research paper that examines the issues faced by the earliest police social workers. The second research project analyzes the perceived needs of current police social workers using a focus group, a methodology not previously applied to this population. The final product is a plenary presentation on the state of the profession, delivered at the 2025 National Police Social Work Conference. This dissertation aims to inform practitioners, scholars, educators, and community leaders as they make pressing public safety decisions.

Keywords: police social work, public safety social work, policewomen, police reform, embedded

Expanding the Biosocial Theory: The Connection Between Sensory and Emotion Dysregulation in Borderline Personality Disorder

Candidate: Becky Doane

Supervising Professor: Kingsley Chigbu, Ph.D., MSW, CFNIP, LICSW

Borderline personality disorder (BPD) has been characterized as a disorder of multiple types of dysregulation. Marsha Linehan's biosocial theory proposes that the disorder originates from both biological and social components. One biological component that has not been widely studied in BPD is sensory regulation. This is despite neurobiological

evidence that emotion regulation and sensory regulation occur in many of the same areas of the brain. This dissertation uses three products to explore the connection between emotion and sensory dysregulation, particularly in those with BPD. It also argues for the importance of including sensory dysregulation as a biological component in the biosocial theory of DBT as well as the biopsychosocial model of social work education. The first product is a conceptual paper introducing the relationship between sensory and emotion dysregulation in BPD. The next product is a systematic review of the literature exploring the current understanding of how sensory dysregulation impacts emotion dysregulation with an emphasis on BPD. The final product is a presentation at a professional conference for social work educators focusing on the need to include sensory regulation as a biological component of the biopsychosocial model taught in social work education programs. Recognizing the sensory-emotion regulation connection can help clinicians better assess and treat those with BPD, potentially reducing symptoms such as self-harm and suicidality.

Keywords: borderline personality disorder, sensory processing disorder, sensory dysregulation, emotion dysregulation, biosocial theory, dialectical behavior therapy, social work education, biopsychosocial model

Assessing and Improving Perinatal Mental Health Screening Through a Culturally Responsive Lens

Candidate: Bobbi L. Fields

Supervising Professor: Robin Whitebird, Ph.D., MSW, LISW

Suicide is the leading cause of pregnancy related death in the United States with an increased prevalence within minority women. Although these statistics are staggering, there are limited culturally responsive screening procedures for Perinatal Mood and Anxiety Disorders (PMADs). This banded dissertation comprises of three products with an overarching theme to assess and improve the current screening procedures for perinatal mental health within minority women. The first product is a conceptual manuscript presenting the Culturally Responsive Perinatal Screening Model (CRPSM) that proposes five interrelated components needed to assess during the perinatal mental health screening process. The second product is a qualitative research manuscript using semi-structured interviews to explore healthcare and behavioral health practitioners screening practices for PMADs within minority women and the integration of cultural inclusivity in a rural environment. The final product is a poster presentation presenting the CRPSM at a peer reviewed regional conference.

Keywords: perinatal mental health, perinatal screening procedures, minority women, cultural inclusivity, rural environment, rural providers, PMADs.

From Resources to Inclusion: Supporting Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) People in Missouri Communities and Schools

Candidate: Sarah C. Langley

Supervising Professor: Robin Whitebird, Ph.D., MSW, LISW

The Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) community is a minority group that is often underserved and overlooked. In the state of Missouri, LGBTQ specific services and resources are difficult to access; this is especially true for LGBTQ people living in more rural areas of the state. Schools are a place where all students should feel included and safe to be who they are. This Banded Dissertation expanded on the resources available in Missouri for the LGBTQ community and what can be done to fill these service gaps especially in school settings. The first product titled, Serving Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) Students in School, offers a conceptual model to best serve LGBTQ students to ensure all students feel safe and included. The second product, titled Missouri Case Study: Focusing on the Services and Needs of Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) People, explores the LGBTQ specific services for LGBTQ people in Missouri. The final product is a poster presentation titled, LGBTQ Students in Public Schools-How Can We Help?, which presents the conceptual model for active inclusion in the public forum.

Keywords: Lesbian, Gay, Bisexual, Transgender, and Queer (LGBTQ) community, Missouri, LGBTQ disparities, LGBTQ services, accessibility of resources, LGBTQ school support, Missouri social work, active inclusion, Biopsychosocial Model

The Powerhouse of Connection: Fostering Security and Achievement through Relational Engagement

Candidate: Britt P. Olean

Supervising Professor: Kingsley Chigbu, Ph.D., MSW, CFNIP, LICSW

Student engagement is a multidimensional concept of academic success, rooted in teacher-student relationships that foster the security and belonging essential for motivation. Despite extensive research on student engagement, prevailing models often emphasize instructional and cognitive strategies while under examining the relational, emotional, and cultural factors needed to support the whole student. This Banded Dissertation addresses the need for strategies that support students holistically while exploring the under-researched influence of youth culture on school connectivity. Ultimately, this work seeks to deepen the conceptual understanding of engagement to better facilitate student achievement. The first product of this Banded Dissertation is a conceptual analysis titled *It's All About Relationships: The Role of Connection in Student Engagement*. This paper investigates the integration of attachment theory into the classroom setting, specifically examining its implications for the dyadic student-teacher relationship. The second product, *Correlates of Student Engagement and Academic Success among Minnesota Youth: A Review of Survey Data*, is a quantitative research study examining youth engagement over time using data from the 2016, 2019, and 2022 Minnesota Student Surveys. The third product is a peer-reviewed conference presentation delivered at the Minnesota Association for Children's Mental Health (MACMH) annual conference. Titled *Understanding and Responding to Youth Experiences Across Time*, this presentation translated the empirical findings from product two into actionable practice, advocating for responsive support models that meet the evolving mental health and developmental needs of youth.

Keywords: student engagement, school belonging, teacher practices, student-teacher relationship, student-teacher connection

Supervision Matters: Shaping Competent and Confident Social Workers

Candidate: Amanda R. Thooft

Supervising Professor: Robin Whitebird, Ph.D., MSW, LISW

Social work supervision serves as a critical bridge between education, licensure, and professional practice. Despite its centrality to the profession, supervision is often inconsistently implemented, variably structured, and underexamined in both scholarship and policy. This Banded Dissertation (BD) examines the role of high-quality supervision in fostering competence and confidence among social workers. The first product, a conceptual paper titled *Supervision in Social Work: Why Quality Matters*, analyzes the historical evolution, purposes, and outcomes of social work supervision. It highlights supervision's role in bridging gaps between academic preparation and licensure requirements while addressing systemic inequities in professional development. The second product is a qualitative research study, *Exploring Supervisees' Perspectives on Effective Supervision*, which examines supervision from the perspective of supervisees and identifies key elements that contribute to meaningful supervisory experiences. The third product is a peer-reviewed conference presentation delivered at the Minnesota Social Services Association (MSSA) Annual Conference, titled *Supervision for Licensure: Why It Matters*. This presentation translates the conceptual and empirical findings into practical guidance for supervisors and supervisees, emphasizing competency development. Collectively, these products demonstrate that evidence-based supervision is essential for cultivating competent and confident social workers and ultimately improving client outcomes. The dissertation concludes with recommendations for policy, practice, and future research, advocating for standardized supervision training, expanded access to quality supervision, and competency-based models aligned with contemporary social work practice.

Keywords: supervision, social work, licensure preparation, professional competence, supervisory quality, clinician confidence