

Profiles in Social Work

Episode 44 – Matt Regan

Intro - Hi, I'm Charmaine Williams, Associate Professor and Associate Dean, Academic, for the University of Toronto, Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work. Welcome to Profiles in Social Work. This podcast series is produced by our Faculty and Alumni Association. In 2014 the Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work is celebrating 100 years of contributing to Social Work Practice and Education. You can find out more about us by visiting us online at www.socialwork.utoronto.ca We're glad you could join us today. The series Profiles in Social Work highlights how social workers are making a positive difference in our communities by presenting stories of how social work graduates are using their degrees. We hope you will enjoy this series. Especially if you are thinking about a career in social work or interested in hearing about what social workers do.

Profile – Matt Regan

My name is Matt Regan and I graduated from the University of Toronto, Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work in 2006.

I did an M.A. and after I finished that degree I took a job in a homeless shelter, and while I was working in the shelter, working with homeless individuals, I became increasingly interested in the bigger picture issues that affect poverty and social inequality and homelessness; big social issues. And I enjoyed working in a frontline job but I had real interest in social policy that got sparked through that experience and I actually started taking out some books from the library on social policy, one of which was written by a prof in the Faculty. Someone who teaches social work talking about social policy and using social policy as a tool of social work. It began to really interest me even more. My undergrad is in Sociology, so it seemed like applied Sociology; taking those ideas about working with people and society and making it very tangible.

I remember most clearly the people that I met, both faculty and fellow students, it was really a very diverse range of people which was great for interesting discussions in class but then also outside of class. To this day I have maintained contact with folks that I met while in the program and the exchange of ideas and perspectives and the friendships

that I formed while here, I think are the things that really stick out when I think back on my time as a student.

I had the opportunity to work on a number of research projects that were here, both as a practicum and as a research assistant. I was lucky to have that opportunity. Those experiences were great to make connections in terms of taking some of what I had learned and applying it a bit more directly. I think I took all the policy courses that were offered in addition to the more clinically focused courses, and it's interesting actually looking back how the policy courses were great in terms of the content and the type of work that I do, but you'd be surprised how the more soft skills social work skills come in handy when you're actually working in an office with all different kinds of personalities and navigating those relationships. There were opportunities in the Faculty to be tapped into and it was a pretty rich environment. The more I educated myself on what Social Work was the more I began to think "this actually makes sense for who I am and what I want to do in the longer run".

For the last several years I have worked for the Government of Ontario in a few different ministries. Right now I work in the Ministry of Health and my role is in the area of health system planning, in particular health human resources planning to ensure that people in the province will have access to the right number and mix of various health professionals, so doctors, nurses, and any number of allied health professionals like physiotherapists, personal support workers. It's very much focused on meeting needs in society and when you think of how important and how personal healthcare is, the work of actually trying to plan what types of providers are needed, what types of specialties within those professional groups are needed, what you anticipate health needs to be over the long run, using all this information from various data and modeling resources, working with medical schools, teaching hospitals, advocacy groups, ensuring that we're producing and maintaining and supporting health professionals across the province. Some days will be very meeting focused. For example, meeting with stakeholders that work mostly in the University sector around planning for postgraduate medical education; so these would be the residencies. In terms of planning for physicians, which is one small part of the health human resource field. Those meetings are often focused on trying to get folks on the same page, ensure that you understand what their issues are, that they understand where you're at, and work together to try to determine what we need with respect to the number of residency positions in medical schools.

A lot of the work of a policy analyst or policy advisor in government is developing material for more senior people in the ministry to look at. I support a lot of government decision making. If somebody needs to make a decision around a particular program or



initiative, myself and my colleagues would develop the material that would outline what the options are, the risks and benefits, costs, then what are the recommendations in order to actually get you from the idea, to actually having a program or policy out there in the world accomplishing what you want it to accomplish. You try to give the folks who ultimately make the decisions, your Minister and sometimes the Premier, the best information that was available to make an informed choice on an issue that affects the people of the province. That's the real role of a public servant, is to ensure that people in elected office, they have the best evidence and the best knowledge at their disposal to make an informed decision. As long as people have the information at their fingertips to actually ensure that they're making a choice based on facts, then we've done our job.

Giving your best advice and then having that advice not be taken, can be challenging. That's probably more a challenge when you're starting out in your career. As you move along you begin to develop what is commonly called in government circles political acuity. Where you begin to kind of understand what the challenges that elected officials face, and there are a lot of factors if you are an elected member of the government that you have to consider. So when you understand what the political world deals with, and you begin to build that into the recommendations that you make to ensure that you're recommending things that won't be complete non-starters, that you're actually giving people recommendations that they can use. You might think that the way to address a certain issue is to create a new program that's going to cost a huge amount of money and might not have that much support among the general population, even though you may honestly look at the evidence and say "this is the best thing to do". But if you know that that is not something that a Minister or Premier can stand up and actually do, you have to figure how else can we address whatever that issue is in a way that will actually have traction.

Learning to be persuasive is actually where the more direct social work training comes in handy, is learning to understand where people are coming from, tease out what their interests and their concerns are, what's driving the way they think, and being conscious where you're coming from and then trying to meet somewhere in the middle where you can create a shared interest that you can then use to recommend something that might not be your perfect solution but is something that at least has a chance of getting done. Another challenge certainly in working in government is things take a very long time. It's not a good place for somebody who's impatient or for somebody who doesn't have a particularly easy time with a lot of different layers of decision making and thinking and rethinking. It is by its nature a bureaucratic institution and there are good reasons for why there is that structure. Government is a huge complex organization. Without that



bureaucratic structure nothing would probably get done at all. The very nature of the beast is that it can take a very long time for things to happen. Depending on your perspective career wise, somebody with perhaps the same interests as myself, but maybe a different temperament would probably be better off in more of an advocacy role or an activist role. It does require a certain tolerance for the uncertainty of a multi-faceted decision making process and just patience to see it through.

The rewards of the work would fall into two, for me two broad categories. One would be the actual nature of the work itself. The technique you learn to be able to develop options for decision makers. Taking a complicated issue that maybe at the outset you don't really know what a good approach is, thinking about it, researching it, talking with colleagues, talking with stakeholders, trying to get multiple perspectives on that issue, then sitting down and writing out some sort of decision making document that walks the reader through what the history is, the background, the context, possible options, pros and cons to those options and looking back at the end of it and thinking "I started not knowing at all where this was going and at the end of it I developed a pretty tidy little package for making a decision about what to do about that issue". And that process can be sometimes months, months, sometimes years working collaboratively with a lot of people to get to that point. It's almost like a jigsaw puzzle where you look at the pieces at the start and say "how am I ever going to put this together" and at the end you're like "wow! That actually makes sense."

In terms of the bigger picture, I remember when I first moved to Toronto, everybody cautioning me "it's going to be really hard to find a doctor" and now it can still be hard depending on where you live in the province but it's not nearly as hard as it used to be and it's not just doctors. Part of the work that we did with that particular initiative was looking at other models for meeting the needs of people with respect to healthcare. There's more than just the old family doctor model; there's family health teams, there's nurse practitioner clinics, there's all kinds of different ways that you can access consistent primary healthcare. We have a healthcare shortage. Well what do we do? Do we just make more doctors? Maybe, but maybe that's not the best way to do it. What are the other options? What are the other delivery options for healthcare that we can look at? Working through all those ideas. At the end of the day you have positive change in society. It's very powerful to see this is the work that we do having a positive impact on the world we live in. For me it's both the intellectual enjoyment of the work and also looking out and seeing "oh, we did something good".

For me being a social worker is bringing a person centred focus to work. Where I feel my role as a social worker comes in in a policy making and program planning



environment is to try to keep in mind what the actual effects will be on the end users of these initiatives, because ultimately that's what we're doing it for. I like to think that myself and other social workers in government try to bring balance to the whole process. I can work to keep the needs of people who are less advantaged but also everybody benefits. Social Work is a very broad profession and ultimately you're working to create a society that works for everybody. Individual needs and societal needs are front and centre to what we learn about when we're studying. I feel fairly proud to be able to bring that perspective to the work that I do. Ultimately what benefit does this have to the person who's going to be using a program or using an initiative? And if you can't really think that clearly about what that benefit would be, then maybe it's time to rethink what it is that we're doing.

As I was sitting in class thinking "why am I learning to interview a client when I don't have any interest in ever actually doing this?" Looking back now those skills are actually very useful, in ways that I maybe wouldn't have thought they were useful at the time. So I think I'd tell my younger self "be an omnivore in terms of your knowledge and your experiences. You want to be working to build a flexible mental framework to be able to have a long and enriching career".

Outro - This is Charmaine Williams from the University of Toronto Factor-Inwentash Faculty of Social Work. Thank you for listening to our podcast. In 2014 our school is celebrating 100 years of social work research, teaching and community service. For more information about the faculty and our programs we invite you to visit our website at www.socialwork.utoronto.ca