

I am honored to speak today about our dear colleague and friend, Robert Dunigan, a researcher, clinician, educator, and mentor at the Heller School, who passed away on February 3. We've known Robert from the day he walked in the Heller door 30 years ago as a PhD student and trainee in alcohol health services research. He has worn many hats in these years... student, alum, researcher, teacher, mentor, advocate and friend to many.

Robert was born in Kalamazoo, Michigan, the 2nd oldest of 6 siblings, where his father was a police officer and his mother was a home support specialist in the public schools and served as President of the SEIU, Local 517 union. He played football – the family joke was that he broke his leg in practice before the first game – and had a creative streak (art and drama) although we didn't see that side of him.

Robert spent 15 years as a clinical provider for people with serious mental illness and other disabilities, across the age range, with particular interest in both young people and older adults. This experience was a defining factor in who Robert was professionally and as a person.

He was the first in his family to attend college, and started his mentoring role early – encouraging his siblings, and later his nieces and nephews, to follow in his footsteps. In addition to his PhD from Heller in 2004, Robert received a Bachelors in Psychology with a minor in social work from Western Michigan University in Kalamazoo and a Masters in Social Work from Boston College.

He was funny and self-deprecating - he often told the story of being ready for his MSW and wanting to go to the exciting, diverse, gritty urban environment at Boston University, only to arrive and discover there were two MSW programs called Boston something, so spent his 2 years in Newton instead. 😊

Before coming back to Heller, Robert was faculty at the Boston College School of Social Work and had conducted research on minority health, aging, and alcohol use at Harvard's medical school and school of public health.

Robert returned to Heller in 2005 as a researcher in the Institute for Behavioral Health (IBH), contributing significantly to “knowledge advancing social justice”. Much of his work addressed health disparities and substance use treatment needs of Black, Latino and other marginalized populations. Robert worked closely with colleagues to establish the IBH Antiracism Group to look deeply at how we conduct our research and promote antiracism in all our work.

Robert also worked with and connected the IBH community with many external partners who brought their expertise and lived experience to their work addressing the needs of marginalized populations.

As a Black man with a PhD – a very small group – he was aware of the importance of mentors and opportunities that helped him to succeed. He also was aware of the importance of giving back, through informal relationships as well as structured programs. He was a mentor to many young Black and Latino students and investigators, helping them navigate the complex research world, serving in this role at Heller, Brandeis, and across the country.

Robert taught a Heller course on Policy Perspectives on Criminal Legal System Disparities. He taught students to look critically at the policies and practices that drive disparities for those involved in the legal system, especially Black, Latino and other marginalized populations. Students truly loved his course and the way he encouraged open discussion. He also led the Students of Color group in Heller's Masters of Public Policy (MPP) program for many years.

Last Spring, Robert received Heller's Equity, Inclusion, and Diversity (EID) Award, as he exemplified EID as a key value throughout his work, by his use of formal programming, curriculum development, attention to classroom dynamics, informal discussions and support for students, and focused efforts on research projects.

Robert asked the difficult questions and helped us all challenge our assumptions and broaden our perspectives. And he encouraged us to do the same regardless of our own experiences with inequities. He was a down-to-earth, "tell it like it is" kind of a guy, one reason why he was widely appreciated by his students and all his collaborators.

Robert brought his expertise, humor, and lived experiences when discussing difficult and challenging topics. Research meetings and classes were always more fun when he was in the room. As colleagues and friends, we learned deeply from him and will continue to channel his goals for a just world. As one student wrote, "the world is less bright without Robert in it." May his memory be a blessing.

--Sharon Reif, Professor, Heller School