

November 11, 2021

Scholarship Selection Committee
Foundation for the Advancement of Health Education

Dear Committee Members:

I strongly advocate awarding Mx. Niles Zoschke (pronouns they/them/theirs) with the Dr. Delbert Oberteuffer Graduate Student Scholarship. Niles and I first connected when they reached out to inquire about learning at UTHealth as a doctoral student. We quickly connected over shared research interests and passion for sexual and gender minority health equity. Shortly after we were introduced, I became Niles' advisor. I also offered Niles a graduate research position on my team and had the privilege of teaching them in my Health Promotion Theories for Individuals and Groups class.

Niles came ready to work and succeed. They have a current GPA of 4.0, passed their preliminary exam with flying colors, and have tremendously enriched my classes with thoughtful contributions. Niles has also provided social, emotional, and scholarly support to members of their cohort who are struggling. Niles' resume lists multiple leadership roles. I have had the privilege of witnessing these skills in person in class.

This scholastic achievement is in addition to Niles' valuable contributions to my multiple research projects. Niles' has consistently met project deliverables, providing excellent products for my team with little guidance. This performance has left an indelible impression on our team leadership and among our colleagues at University of Minnesota, with whom Niles also works. Niles is also my teacher's assistant this semester, providing passionate education, mentorship and support, and critical evaluation for nearly 40 students across two sections. Niles is always ready to perform and has gone above and beyond expectations on multiple occasions. For example, recruitment on two of my research projects has been challenging in light of the COVID-19 pandemic. To pick up the slack, Niles helped develop a comprehensive canvassing strategy to deliver program recruitment materials to over 100 healthcare locations across Houston. Niles worked extra hours to meet these deadlines and leveraged their experience in community organizing to implement this innovative recruitment strategy. For these reasons, Niles is worthy of the Dr. Delbert Oberteuffer Graduate Student Scholarship.

But Niles' career did not begin at enrollment at UTHealth; far from it. They began their career in health equity and social justice by earning a bachelor's degree in Cultural Anthropology with a focus on structural racism in 2010. They were granted a full-ride scholarship for each year and were awarded with the Presidential Scholar Award in Anthropology; the highest accolade the college provides. Wanting more training in qualitative analysis and health equity, Niles obtained a Master's in Public Health from Saint Louis University (SLU) in 2014 on a full-ride graduate research assistantship, concentrating on Health Education and Behavioral Science.

It was at SLU that Niles discovered their passion for sexual and gender minority health equity. Niles was guided by a professional relationship with a promising scholar in the field. Heartbreakingly, this scholar lost his life to suicide. Through this experience Niles was dedicated to improve LGBTQIA+ population health.

One of the strengths that Niles brings to the field of public health is the synthesis of health and economic justice. Niles incorporates class analysis into all their work. As evidence, Niles has worked on dozens of social justice campaigns and with hundreds of activists and organizers. These experiences ranged from working on raising the minimum wage, fighting so-called “Right to Work,” and assisting multiple union campaigns for better workplace protections and dignity. Niles incorporates their artistic eye in their advocacy as well, through photography. Niles’ portraits of Black St. Louisans living with HIV have been featured in museums and in public health intervention communications. One of Niles most notable social justice contributions was founding Rainbow Workers’ Alliance, a community organization focused on raising wages, improving workplace protections, and expanding healthcare coverage for LGBTQ+ people in St. Louis. This organization now thrives with new leadership after Niles moved to Houston.

Niles also brings a wealth of experience in each of the core functions of public health. They have worked in research, governmental regulation, policy, and practice. They have contributed to multiple CDC-sponsored publications. In each of these roles Niles brought LGBTQ+ equity to the forefront. For example, while writing for Health Communications in Tobacco Control and Prevention, 2018, they wrote a case study focused on innovative digital communications tailored for LGBTQ+ audiences. The featured practices were disseminated to hundreds of tobacco control programs and partners around the country.

Working at the City of St. Louis Department of Health, Niles applied their community organizing and systems thinking approaches to build health equity as the Chair of the Health and Racial Equity Strategic Implementation Committee, and as the liaison to the Built Environment Team for the Community Health Improvement Plan. In these roles Niles engaged community stakeholders, established cross-departmental collaboration, and agitated for an infrastructure program that was built accessibility and racial equity. Niles leads by analyzing power and initiating systems change. These experiences and strengths are exhibited as my colleague and student. And they are just a snippet of the outstanding contributions Niles’ has made to the field of public health already. Each day Niles’ surprises me with experience or insight I did not know they had.

Awarding Niles with the Dr. Delbert Oberteuffer Graduate Student Scholarship will aid their journey in school. Unfortunately, Niles’ photography income has taken an enormous hit due to the pandemic. Therefore, these scholarships can provide significant financial support so they can continue achieving and eventually become a research professor at a college like UTHealth.

Niles is humble, passionate, sensitive, driven, intelligent, and dedicated to their community. Please accept my sincerest recommendation for awarding Niles with the Dr. Delbert Oberteuffer Graduate Student Scholarship. Thank you for your consideration and please reach out if you would like to learn more.

Sincerely,



J. Michael Wilkerson, PhD, MPH