

Confluence Podcast Transcript: Jenny Rotzal

Anisa Goforth:

Last year, um, Jenny had the opportunity to be a therapist within an interdisciplinary clinic for pre-service psychologists and pre-service speech language pathologists. And she did just such a wonderful, thorough, thoughtful job with that, that we decided to invite her, um, as a leader and as a peer supervisor providing support to the graduate students who are learning to also then provide intervention services. So, um, her ability to not only take on a new opportunity, um, for most graduate students an opportunity like that might be kind of scary. And so she approached it with this kind of cool, collected, professional approach to a new and exciting opportunity.

Ashby Kinch:

You just heard the voice of Anisa Goforth, professor of Psychology, talking about Jenny Rotzal, a student in UM's PhD program in School Psychology. Jenny has just wrapped up her research and clinical work here at UM, and is starting a year as a pre-doctoral intern at the Huntsman Mental Health Institute in Salt Lake City.

This is part of a series of episodes focusing on the mental and behavioral health programs at UM that serve key stakeholders in the community, the state, and the region. In this episode, we hear from Jenny about her choice to pursue a PhD in School Psychology, a field that has a crucial role in helping school professionals screen students who may have severe psychological problems inhibiting their learning. But a shortage of professionals equipped to complete these screenings has caused a bottleneck across the state.

We talk about the clinical training of her program, and some of the challenges of practicing in rural areas. We also discuss her work on a grant linking graduate students and faculty from several different graduate programs into an "Integrative Behavioral Health" model for care.

Listeners will be inspired to hear about emerging voices in the behavioral health sphere who are going to make positive impacts in the years to come!

Ashby Kinch: Welcome to Confluence.

Jenny Rotzal: Hey, thank you.

Ashby Kinch: So, you know, as we said at the, in the open, you know, this is part of a series where we're kind of just exploring the human talent that we have on this campus in the mental health and wellness support, um, area. And of course, you're a student in the School Psychology program. Um, you're in your fourth year, so you're kind of at this pivot point where you've done all your coursework or you're completing it now. And, uh, you got a, uh, congratulations, a dissertation proposal and you've already started collecting data. So you're kind of well on your way.

Um, so, what we like to do is kind of talk about that journey, what it's been like for you as a graduate student at um un, but also how you got here. So, so what's your Montana story? How'd you end up here?

Jenny Rotzal: Yeah, so I am actually somebody that, um, is from out of state. I'm originally from Pennsylvania. Um, I got my undergrad degree at the, uh, Penn State University, and then I got a master's in Human Development at University of Pennsylvania. Um, and really from there, that's when I started, um, falling--kind of stumbling--into the world of school psychology. Like, wait, I love psychometric assessments and, like, what we can do when we use these sort of assessments with children to identify really what's going on in their head or maybe how they see the world or how they see academics and when I realized that was a job and working with kids, I was like: "Whoa, sign me up."

So, um, that started me on my journey for looking for a program. Um, I was looking for something where it would be much more collaborative rather than competitive of a feeling when it comes to my cohort as well as just the, the university as a whole. Um, after going to some pretty cutthroat, um, universities, I wanted something like a breath of fresh air, I suppose. So, um, I ended up stumbling into the University of Montana as well. I found Jacquie [Brown, Professor of Psychology] and the research that she does. So, um, a lot of my initial research interests stems from violence prevention and crisis interventions in schools, especially in the past two decades where we've seen a lot of school shootings. But like beyond that, what, um, perhaps physical fights, so, or like bringing a knife to school. Those sort of, um, incidents that can also really impact school climate and how kids perceive their safety. Um, and that's ultimately what brought me here. So, um, we drove 3000 miles out from Pennsylvania.

Ashby Kinch: Wow. Yeah, it's a big leap. Had you visited before?

Jenny Rotzal: I came for my interview, um, so in our program we did have a, a one-day interview and as soon as I saw the mountains, I was like: "this is, this is it." And it was the old airport too, and I was like: "This is my place." I immediately felt like it was home. This is, this is where I belong. And that was my first interview of my jour--my PhD journey. And then when I went to the other ones, nothing compared, it was, everything else felt very lackluster.

Ashby Kinch: It set kind of an anchor for, you know, positive anchor. But it's so interesting 'cause of course we do hear that story a lot because it's true, right? I mean, this is an amazing place. Um, and, and that lure of the mountains, but you kind of started by saying, 'cause it's, it's really a, uh, in your particular case, a combination--I mean, I know that faculty, well, they're incredibly warm, incredibly encouraging. And so it's interesting that you already also had that frame, that you wanted a less competitive environment, um, a more collaborative environment that couldn't describe that faculty better. Um, that's what they kind of hang their hat on.

Jenny Rotzal: Absolutely. Just incredibly warm, collaborative, like what a great model, um, to show us as students.

Ashby Kinch: And so four years in, I'm assuming the mountains have continued to fascinate you and they haven't dulled?

Jenny Rotzal: Absolutely. Yeah. It's very bittersweet to leave for, um, predoctoral internship, but I'm really excited at the opportunities and I do see myself coming back, if possible.

Ashby Kinch: Yeah. So your predoctoral internship, you know, for listeners who don't kind of understand the psychology world, you know, the, the training in, in a PhD in psychology, you know, school psychology or clinical is, is really intense. There's a whole, you know, sort of intellectual apparatus part of it, learning research, methodologies, theories. Then there's a really intense practicum component. You've already done your work here. And we may loop back to some of that later. But the next step you're doing is this, sort of while you're completing your dissertation, you're doing professional immersion work in a, in a clinical environment. So you've chosen the Huntsman, uh, Mental Health Institute, which is, uh, down in Salt Lake City. Still in the mountains.

Jenny Rotzal: Sure is.

Ashby Kinch: So there's some affinity there. Yeah. What was that choice all about? What are you gonna get from that experience?

Jenny Rotzal: I think what I was really attracted to about that particular program and how it really meshed well with my training thus far at University of Montana is the training opportunities that University of Montana allow for a school and clinical approach, especially from a school psychology, um, perspective. In the field of school psychology, we focus a lot on assessments and consultation. Um, and that's gonna become very helpful, especially in this new role where, um, Huntsman is known for high acuity, high severity for children and adolescent inpatient and residential facilities. Um, so I'm really gonna have to use all these assessments and experiences that I've had here to best conceptualize the cases that I'm, I'm going to be coming up with to help serve children and support them through their mental health crises.

Ashby Kinch: But that context will not be a school setting. It'll be a clinical setting. And so that's really, that blend is a really interesting phenomenon. Something I wanna go back to, you know, in, in a second. So how many years in that placement and, and, and then kind of what's after that?

Jenny Rotzal: Yeah, so my predoctoral internship is only one year, or it's one year total. So I'll be starting in June and then ending in June of 2024. Um, and then from there I'm hoping to pursue a post-doctorate, um, to obtain licensure, um, take the E Triple P [EPPP: Examination for Professional Practice in Psychology], which is the big test we have to take in order to

Ashby Kinch: E Triple P sounds cool.

Jenny Rotzal: It does sound pretty cool, honestly. Um, sounds very intimidating too. Um, I'm hoping to pursue that and my kind of pipeline dream is providing, um, assessments to families and children. So, there's a massive waiting list for psychological or neuropsychological psychoeducational evaluations, especially in Montana. Um, and I think we're doing such a disservice to have families sit on a year long waiting list while their kid is continuing to struggle with whatever it may be. Um, so I'm hoping to, um, perhaps create one of those facilities in Missoula or the like local area, um, to maybe shorten that wait list a little bit as well as, like, try to provide very comprehensive and personalized, um, reports as well as like recommendations for those families as well.

Ashby Kinch: That's so exciting to hear because of course, you know, as we said in the intro, you know, this conversation is part of a broader statewide conversation about, um, mental health access and, and talent. Of course on the one hand there's obviously, you're, you're pointing to a really acute need that we have so few trained psychologists in the state who can do those assessments. So there's a kind of backlog that stops families from getting the treatments. They need a kind of a barrier to access there. Um, but we have talent and it's just delightful to hear that you are, are committed to kind of coming back and, and working in the community to, um, meet that. And so a lot of school psychologists, um, will end up in a, in a, an educational setting. But you kind of already can see that there's this other space that you want to kind of get into that would be sort of obviously helpful and supportive of the educational system, but it would really be more focused on getting children access to care.

Jenny Rotzal: Absolutely. And I think that's the beauty of school psychology PhD programs, in general, but also the school psychology program at the University of Montana. Because we do have opportunities to work in schools, but also we get to work at the Clinical Psychology center and provide assessments. We do therapy, um, we really get that taste for clinical. And it wasn't originally what I was thinking I would pursue, but once I had that opportunity, I realized that was what I was looking for in addition to working in the school settings and hearing about these really frustrating wait lists and, um, barriers that these families in Montana are facing to receive the support their children need. Um, that kind of has driven me to where I am today and with my, my current goals as well.

Ashby Kinch: Yeah. And so when you described at the beginning kind of why you ended up in school psychology as a discipline and as a field, you sort of talked about these methodologies and school psych--psychometric evaluation, population-level work. Um, I'm really interested in that. So in the sense of, where you're headed with your career, what's the intellectual apparatus? How do you meld the research components and the methodologies with the practice? You know, you think from a family perspective, it collapses on your child. Like you say: "I want my child to get support." But a school psychologist kind of has to see a broader terrain. And has to look at the population level and has to think about, you know, these larger issues of systems and how assessments work. So yeah, how do you meld that in your particular sort of understanding of the field?

Jenny Rotzal: I think it's kind of like a perspective that you take on, especially when you're working in that field of trying to see the child, the whole child, not necessarily the child you see in the school setting for six hours or the child you see one hour a week in therapy. Trying to consider what do they do all those other hours of the week? What does their life look like? So what does their family system look like? Um, is there generational trauma? Is there poverty? Other, um, factors that can impact like not only their development but their mental health as well as the development and mental health of their family members as well. Um, so that's something I'm hoping I can remain cognizant of, um, and maintain this kind of 30,000 foot view, um, when helping kids not get siloed into just thinking about one particular concern that a parent or the child might have. And looking at it from a more broad perspective.

Ashby Kinch: That broader view allows you to kind of situate a whole population rather than just the individual.

Jenny Rotzal: Absolutely.

Ashby Kinch: So that's where the intervention can be so powerful. Well, tell us a little bit about your, your research. What are you doing for your doctoral research?

Jenny Rotzal: Yeah. I feel like my research for my dissertation has been, um, particularly unique because it has been greatly influenced by the COVID-19 pandemic, um, in many facets. Um, but ultimately what I'm hoping to research is the use of grief interventions and supports, um, in rural schools impacted by COVID-19. So we know that rural schools in general usually have less mental health support for children just because they have less training opportunities, less, um, professional development opportunities, less staff in general. Um, these kids are also frequently, um, face, I guess, geographic barriers to access mental health care. So they become reliant on what can be offered in this school setting. Um, and, when it comes to COVID-19, how many kids' mental health has suffered, whether it be from, um, the grieving of losing just a sense of normalcy in their life and, like, those developmental milestones that they were not able to, um, experience, but also the, the death of people or sickness of from COVID-19 associated with that. So there's been a lot of mental health fallout for kids in the past couple of years and all of the participants I've spoken of have just, um, noticed a massive uptick in depression, anxiety, as well as grief, um, and suicide in their schools. Um, and we can't say that's directly correlated to the COVID-19 pandemic, but I think there were certainly factors that kind of trickled out as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic occurring.

Ashby Kinch: Yeah. And you'll need to study that, um, over some time and coordinate that with a bunch of people. I mean, it's one of the things we try to elevate on this podcast is just the importance of research across the board in our society that people, you know, quickly, you know, for obvious reasons, we gotta go in and, and solve, or directly address, let's say, um, the immediate aftermath of a pandemic. But we also need people who look at the bigger picture and can kind of take a problem and push it through all the way to the end 'cause, you know, in 10 years, 15 years, we're gonna wanna see what the knock-on effects are of this moment. And it's gonna take people who have done good research on the front end, and then some people

who stay with that problem to kind of look at it clearly and, and we'll learn a lot. Right?

So it's, it's a terrible moment. Right? There's no, no denying that. Um, but let's learn. I really love that you're diving into that space. You said something really important I think that just for listeners in general, we want to elevate, which is, especially for rural communities in Montana, how important the school is. The school is a centralization of resources and support, um, across the board, not just in psychology, but you know, we have social workers, we have kids who are in a dispersed geographical context, and this is the one place they come consistently and each day there can be a support for them there. The part that you're talking about is the psychological part, and it's really important. A school psychologist might be the only practicing psychologist in that entire community in very many parts of rural Montana. And so the only place for them to get that assessment and support might be right there in their school setting. So it's just such an important thing to kind of bring to the surface. I wanna make sure listeners hear how important this work that you're doing is. How are you doing it? What's your survey methodology? How are you kind of contacting folks out there?

Jenny Rotzal: Sure. So I'm looking at actually five states with high rates of rurality. So for example, Montana has about an 84% rate of rurality, which is like defined as how many people live in a certain area per square mile. Um, and so I'm ultimately looking at Montana, Idaho, North and South Dakota and Wyoming. Contacting the school counselors and the school psychologists. So the people that are really in the trenches usually with the kids, if there's a mental health crisis or they, um, are the people that children come to when they are in need of support. Um, and I've been reaching out to their organization, so like the Wyoming School Counselor Association and there's one for each state as well as one for the school psychologists as well. Um, I've been reaching out through that to, um, first start off with the demographic survey, like, a little bit of a screen or two to see if they, um, qualify for the study. And ultimately, um, if they're interested, they can sign up to do a 30 to 45 minute interview. Um, and that's where I ask a lot of questions. Much more specifically, it's recorded on Zoom. And, um, I'm asking questions like: what have things looked like perhaps since the, um, pandemic has begun versus now? How things have changed. Um, if they believe they have all the resources that they need to provide, um, grief interventions for their students or what barriers they may be facing? So I'm really trying to get into the nitty gritty of: what are the obstacles in their way, if there are any obstacles, in providing interventions?

And really across the board, what seems to be happening is there's a lack of perhaps resources, um, such as manpower, um, time, because they have so many other hats they have to wear, especially psychologists who have to do evaluations. Counselors have to create schedules. There's so many other things they must do that are part of the job requirement, and they're just seeing this mental health need increase and they can't really do that much about it because there's not enough people. Um, another thing I've been hearing a lot about is the CARES Fund, um, from the Coronavirus, is ending this year. Because of during those three years, a lot of, a lot of school districts were able to hire academic and behavior interventionists, maybe another social worker, another school counselor. And once that funding is

gone, it's gone. And those positions will likely be cut as well. So I'm really curious as well, um, I'm curious what the literature will say next year as well. Like, what is school gonna look like for these kids who were, I mean, not even fully supported? And, but yet all of these services are gonna drop next year.

Ashby Kinch: Yeah. And these, you know, we're kind of running a society-wide experiment on a, on a few things where in the wake of COVID we made some strategic and maybe some un-strategic--you know, we did throw some money at some problems and we just didn't even know, like, "let's try it." So, so yeah. A kind of more optimistic thing would be to say maybe in the wake of the CARES money running out, we'll recognize studies like yours might show. We'll recognize where interventions really were effective, you know? And so maybe that's a more optimistic way of looking that we can kind of have data to show that, that these things work. Right? And, and if you put the funding in the right spot, maybe it has a, a positive impact.

Jenny Rotzal: Yeah. I think a silver lining, um, to all of this also is, this has kind of woken up perhaps some legislation of like: "Oh, the mental health needs of kids are actually very high." And even more at a, at a smaller level of, um, districts recognizing that, "Oh, we do need school counselors and we do need behavioral interventionists" because these children's needs are suddenly much higher, remarkably higher. And as a result, um, what we need to do in order to support them is going to change.

Ashby Kinch: Yeah. That's fantastic. Well, and, and I think you, you hit on two things that I think kind of pivot us back to a couple of other things that we should talk about. Um, you know, you talked about behavioral intervention. Now you serve on the behavioral intervention team here at University of Montana. How common is that for a graduate student to be on it?

Jenny Rotzal: Um, I, I believe I'm the only one. Yeah. Um, I don't, haven't heard of any. Previous faculty or retired faculty, Chris Fiore, um, had actually read my thesis, which was focused on, um, violence prevention in rural schools, actually. And she invited me to be on part of the board. Um, so--

Ashby Kinch: Shout out to Chris.

Jenny Rotzal: Shout out to Chris. Hi, Chris!

Ashby Kinch: I've known her, known her for years. She's an amazing person. Anyone on this campus who's either worked with Chris or with all of her other work, she's just a good citizen of the University of Montana. We miss her.

Jenny Rotzal: Absolutely, we do.

Ashby Kinch: Um, so that's, that's cool. So she kind of drew you into this work. And then it's tough work, right? I mean, you're dealing with students who are in crisis, right?

Jenny Rotzal: Absolutely.

Ashby Kinch: Um, you know, and but so your learning curve there is steep? Or would you kind of feel like you fit right in, you had the training and...?

Jenny Rotzal: I don't wanna say it was like smooth sailing, but it really did feel like: "Oh, this is what intervention planning is supposed to be. This is what supporting students is supposed to look like," um, in a sense of having all these different disciplines come together, um, working together with the same goal in mind of supporting a, a student when they're in crisis. Um, and whatever that may look like, it's frequently very different, like from case to case.

Ashby Kinch: Yeah. You know, you have a social worker and you have a counselor, and you have a psychologist and you have someone in student services and they all take that lens. And in any given case, it might be one of those factors that's more amplified or not. Right?

Jenny Rotzal: Absolutely.

Ashby Kinch: It might be severe mental illness, but it might not be. It might actually be, there's some expressions of behavioral problems, but really it's being driven by an economic problem.

Jenny Rotzal: Absolutely.

Ashby Kinch: Or a family problem. So that that's, you know, that's a classic example of why we need these multidisciplinary perspectives, which is a perfect segue into B-HWET [Behavioral Health Workforce and Education Training]. You've also been involved in the B-HWET grant. Tell us a little bit about that. Be real basic too, just because you know, what is B-HWET? What does it stand for?

Jenny Rotzal: Sure. So B-HWET is the behavioral Health Workforce and Education Training grant. Um, I believe it is a statewide grant, um, which has, um, people in the helping profession. So counselors, social work, psychologists, go out into their local community and try to help where there might be a dearth of, um, experiences or support that people may need. Um, so I have been working in some schools. Um, I was working, um, with a social worker for a little bit and now I'm currently working with a school psychologist, um, that's at Chief Charlo. Um, so helping a lot with some crisis intervention as well as consultation with teachers and some assessments as well.

Ashby Kinch: Yeah, so the grant, you know, pays for faculty and students, grad students to kind of work in these communities. But then it also has these really

wonderful team--I mean, the people on the B-HWET grant are amazing, you know? You have, uh I know Jayna Mumbauer over in Counseling's involved and Brian's involved and Holly Schleicher is involved and I'm probably missing a lot. Do you wanna name? Yeah, we have a few others?

Jenny Rotzal: Uh, Greg Macheck as well. Tim Shield, yeah. Yeah. A lot of great people.

Ashby Kinch: So it's just a fantastic team of folks across campus, um, who are bringing, again, their perspectives to bear on the support work. And it's such an important, you know, just in general, this is the platformy preachy thing, right? That it's just so important for the state as a whole to recognize just how much talent and work is going into thinking about how these community models can shift a little bit.

We do need to build up our behavioral intervention workforce. We need folks who do low level screenings like we, you know, not the Rolls Royce, you know, psychiatrist, psychologist. But you know, we need folks who just are trained in behavioral intervention across the board in a lot of professions, you know, nurses, obviously postal workers, just anyone, so we can elevate that awareness of where to see those signs of distress. And how get that person upstream where a problem is not so severe, the help they need so that it doesn't become a downstream problem.

Jenny Rotzal: Absolutely. I think there's, what's really unique, especially with B-HWET, is there's so many different disciplines and opportunities. So there's people working at hospitals. Um, I know of people like such as myself working at schools or, um, working in psychiatric situations. So there's so many, um, opportunities where there is that need to support people, um, and being able to do so, um, in a discipline in which people are interested and perhaps want to build their skills or learn new ones, um, when it comes to B-HWET opportunities. Um, so working in hospital settings, um, community-based medical settings, schools, um, I know some folks are at the All Nations Health Center, so there's a lot of different opportunities just to integrate our helping professionals in, at the University of Montana into the community, um, especially depending on what their specific, um, professional needs and goals are as well.

Ashby Kinch: Yeah and that's important. I'm glad you, you, you know, talked about that diversity because that's really such a, you know, as, as we think beyond the campus context, where we're obviously have incredible faculty, incredible students are, they're getting degrees and going off to great things. But we think about that impact on the state, it really is in a workforce that's diverse and can spread into a lot of different areas and impact the mental health and wellness needs of communities all across the state, you know?

Jenny Rotzal: Yeah. We're not this castle on a hill, as a university. Like we're coming down and we are in the community. And maybe people don't always realize that, and I think that's also a tremendous part of the training that we receive as well.

Ashby Kinch: You know, just to follow up on that, yeah, not just in the community here, but you know, our professionals are all across the state working in veterans support across the, you know, the state and tribes across the state. We have two or three tribal, uh, counselors that trained here. So it's, it's, yeah, it's, it's good to elevate that impact that, that our, um, all of our behavioral workforce and professionals have across the state. Social work, counseling, absolutely. Psychology. That the, the kind of range of suite of programs. Um, each with their different professional emphasis, but with this, you know, integrated care model, really, coming to fruition. I think everyone recognizes the importance of having these coordinated teams, you know?

Jenny Rotzal: Mm-hmm.

Ashby Kinch: So thanks for elevating that.

Jenny Rotzal: Yeah, sure.

Ashby Kinch: Well, I'm just so delighted you came by to talk to us on Confluence, Jenny, this has been fantastic.

Jenny Rotzal: Yeah, my pleasure. Thanks a lot.