



# Heidi Allen, MSW, PhD



Associate Professor

Columbia School of Social Work

## WHAT MOTIVATED YOU TO DEVELOP PSYCHEDELIC COURSES?

My expertise is in health care policy, with a focus on access to care for underserved populations. Research demonstrates that if we do not address the fundamental drivers of access to care, innovative treatments simply widen existing disparities. Social workers are the largest workforce in mental health care, so training them to provide psychedelic-assisted therapy (PAT) is critical to providing access to this care.

## HOW DID YOU DEVELOP YOUR COURSES?

I began my own education in PAT by participating in several training programs, including at the California Institute of Integral Studies (CIIS), Lykos (previously MAPS PBC), and Usona Institute. I then started building course content from a social work perspective, in alignment with the nine core competencies outlined by the [Council on Social Work Education](#), the accrediting agency for social work education.

We set a very ambitious goal: to expose as many social work students as possible to the field of PAT and to prepare small cohorts of selected students to practice PAT after graduation, without the need for more post-graduate training, which can be time-intensive and expensive.

We began with one elective mini-course (7 weeks) in spring 2023. That semester, we also hosted a 10-part learning series, *Foundations in Psychedelic-Assisted Therapy for Social Workers*, featuring lectures from leaders in the field as well as perspectives from panelists whose healing journeys were impacted by psychedelics. These lectures are freely available [online](#). In Spring 2024, we added a full semester (14-week) elective. In the fall of 2024, the Psychedelic Therapy Training Program (PTTP) at CSSW will enroll its first cohort of 20 Master of Social Work (MSW) students. This is the first within-MSW degree psychedelic training program in the world and will prepare graduates to practice PAT after graduation (with supervision as required of all new social work graduates).

Developing course content in psychedelic therapy is challenging. Instructors must be trained and prepared to teach these classes. Vigilance is required to ensure foundational materials, such as assigned readings and lecture slides, remain up to date in this rapidly developing field. It is also a real challenge to develop content from scratch, due to the proprietary and boutique nature of most of the currently available training.

## CAN YOU PROVIDE A BRIEF OVERVIEW OF YOUR COURSE CONTENT?

CSSW offers two electives: a seven-week course and a 14-week course. These courses cover a wide range of topics, including the current legal landscape, ethical implications and considerations, and racial health and justice inequities, to name a few. They aim to provide familiarity with the scientific research, clinical protocols and effects of ketamine, MDMA, and psilocybin, an understanding of the clients or patients who may benefit from it and how to screen them,

and how to refer for this type of care once approved by the U.S. Food and Drug Administration (FDA).

The PTPP involves four semester-long courses (120 hours) as well as 600 hours of clinical work in a practicum placement. *PAT for Social Workers I and II* offer an in-depth introduction to psychedelic compounds, history, science, theory, and social issues prominent in the field, as well as an exploration of the uses of PAT in work with specific diagnostic presentations, community-based healing, the peer-support model, legislative efforts in the field, and navigating the psychedelic ecosystem.

*Clinical Foundations in PAT* focuses on clinical practices and protocols, including session types, best practices, safety, and consent, as well as the use of PAT in conjunction with other clinical interventions. Finally, the *PAT Clinical Seminar* allows students to discuss and receive feedback on their practicum placement, conduct role plays of clinical scenarios, and discuss case studies related to PAT clinical practice.

All psychedelic therapy courses offered at CSSW acknowledge that the therapeutic component of PAT has not been studied under clinical trial conditions, and we hold it lightly, sharing current thinking and promising practices so students can explore further.

### WHO ARE THE STUDENTS YOU TEACH?

All students are enrolled at CSSW and in their second year of study. Application to the PTPP is competitive and available to students who have selected Advanced Clinical Social Work Practice as their specialization.

### WHAT ARE YOUR GOALS FOR STUDENTS WHO COMPLETE YOUR COURSES?

Students who take either of the two elective course offerings may not necessarily make PAT a focus of their clinical practice, but I hope they leave with a foundational knowledge of the state of the science, basic treatment protocol, and the ability to screen patients for appropriateness for referral to PAT and receive patients into general therapy after PAT.

My goal for PTPP students is to prepare them to directly enter the PAT field, with supervision (required of all new graduates), but without the need for additional post-graduate training. Like all social workers, graduates of the PTPP will require continuing education in their chosen specialty, but I hope to prepare graduates to provide access to this care for communities most in need of it.

### WHAT ARE YOUR PLANS FOR PSYCHEDELIC COURSE CONTENT AT YOUR INSTITUTION?

I want to make the PTPP available to students in CSSW's online MSW program. I'm also interested in exploring post-graduate training or continuing education opportunities. I also want to continue my work helping other schools of social work bring this education to their students, and I encourage faculty from accredited schools to reach out for more information.

To get in touch with Heidi and other academic leaders introducing psychedelic coursework in their institutions, please visit our [Psychedelic Therapy Curriculum Contact List](#)