

# The Partnership with Social Service Agencies

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## OVERVIEW

The intent of this chapter is to answer basic questions about social service agencies and field instructors who host and supervise social work students during their field instruction.

### *Why Do Agencies Accept Student Interns?*

Social service agencies rarely receive direct financial incentives from colleges and universities to provide field experiences for their students. However, these agencies like being affiliated with teaching institutions—the training of students is stimulating and enriching for both the agency staff and the students involved. And there are secondary benefits. Most social service agencies are tremendously underfunded and have too many clients and too few staff. When there are not enough staff in an agency, students provide important and valued help. By using students to assist them, social work staff can focus on more problematic cases or begin projects that have been put aside for lack of time. You should expect that the tasks assigned to you will be helpful to the agency. Additionally, the assignments given to students normally introduce students to the variety of tasks performed by social workers in the practicum setting.

Most social service agencies have a strong commitment to the training and development of future social workers. As well as helping to increase the number and quality of social work professionals, the agency finds that providing placements for students has two other advantages: First, the agency can screen, orient, train, and evaluate potential job applicants with a minimal investment

in personnel costs. (It is not unusual for student interns to be offered employment by the agency when they have done a good job and when staff positions become vacant.)

Second, even if the agency cannot offer employment, it benefits by having a pool of future social workers in the community who are knowledgeable about the agency's services. Even though practicum students take jobs in other agencies, they will likely make referrals back to the practicum agency and, in general, will be better informed about the agency.

Beyond these reasons, staff within an agency may want to be field instructors because they enjoy teaching. They may find that their own practice skills are sharpened as they discuss with students various aspects of their practice. Furthermore, working with students can expose the agency staff to new developments in social work and help to relieve job fatigue.

### *How Are Field Agencies Chosen?*

A human service agency may become a field instruction site for social work students in several ways. A faculty member, a social work practitioner in the community, or a student may recommend an agency. An agency may contact a social work program and request students. Or agencies may be approached directly by a faculty field liaison. Generally, agencies are expected to provide information on their programs, the learning experiences available to students, and the qualifications of the personnel available to supervise students. Faculty field liaisons look for agencies with such assets as: competent staff to provide effective supervision and professional learning; a commitment to social work ethics, values, and the training of social work professionals; diverse and broad programs compatible with the school's educational objectives; and adequate physical facilities (e.g., desk space, telephone access) to accommodate students.

Even agencies that have these qualifications may not become field agencies. Often, other factors such as the agency's reputation in the community, its leadership or innovation, and its climate (whether it is conducive to student learning) are considered. Some of the agencies that meet the above general criteria may become particularly attractive as field instruction sites because of considerations such as method of intervention, problem area of practice, population served, or availability of stipends for students.

After an agency has been found suitable for field instruction, the school and the agency frequently enter into a formal contractual agreement governing placement of students. Contained in the contract are the conditions, expectations, and terms of agreement that will be in effect during a student's practicum.

Some social work programs recommend that each field agency develop an outline for field instruction detailing important orientation items, assignments, and learning opportunities. Most social work programs maintain files on frequently used agencies for students' reference.

## *How Are Field Instructors Selected?*

Although agency executive directors may recommend certain staff as supervisors for students, the faculty field liaison ultimately has the responsibility for determining who is qualified to supervise students. Criteria often include a master's degree from an accredited social work program and two to three years of post-graduate professional experience in a given practice area. It is also desirable that the field instructor have at least six months of experience within the particular agency. In some settings, the field instructor may be an experienced BSW. Beyond these primary requirements, the faculty field liaison looks for field instructors who have an interest in teaching and who are supportive of students. Field instructors must be knowledgeable, flexible individuals. They need to make time for overseeing students and for coordinating with faculty field liaisons. Field instructors tend to be among the most competent and energetic of an agency's staff. They incorporate the values and ethics of the profession and usually make excellent role models for students.

In order to know that field instructors meet the minimum requirements, social work programs usually ask for their résumés and maintain a file. However, just meeting the minimum requirements does not make a good field instructor. Field instructors who give students too little of their time, make unrealistic demands, or in other ways show themselves unable to assist students in their educational endeavors may not be used again.

### *Case Example*

Marcie's supervisor, Leesa, is the head of the social services department at a large hospital. Besides supervising 18 full-time and 12 part-time employees, the field instructor has a private practice. On three occasions Marcie's scheduled supervision time has been interrupted by emergency calls from Leesa's clients or other hospital business. However, Leesa has continued to give Marcie new admissions to follow. Marcie has been assigned 12 patients, but after one month has yet to receive any meaningful constructive feedback on her performance. Yesterday Leesa announced that she had been called to be an expert witness in a court case that could last several weeks. When Marcie asked if she could have another supervisor in Leesa's absence, Leesa laughed and said that Marcie should be "less compulsive."

#### *Questions*

1. Is Marcie's request unreasonable?
2. What options should Marcie explore?
3. Should this field instructor continue to be used?

## *How Are Agencies and Students Matched?*

Frequently, students will have a preference for specific practicum settings. Some students know that they want to work with older adults when they graduate and

desire to begin refining their skills with this population. Other students know that they want to work with children or in a medical setting. We believe that most faculty field liaisons try to place students in a practicum consistent with the students' first or second choice. However, what is paramount is that the experience be educational—that the student have opportunity for new learning and growth. In most programs, faculty field liaisons make the final decision.

Assuming that you have a preference (e.g., a mental health setting) and that your faculty field liaison will attempt to find you a practicum within this general area, what additional considerations are important? In our experience, faculty field liaisons give first consideration to the student's educational and learning needs. Faculty field liaisons must assess each student's specific needs and familiarity with the field of social work. Students who are knowledgeable or experienced in one area or type of agency should expect that they will be exposed to new activities (e.g., case management or advocacy) to help them to become well rounded. Students who want to dedicate all of their practicum experience to a specific population (e.g., psychiatric outpatients in a private practice clinic) may find that not every program will support their specialization. Philosophically, many faculty field liaisons believe that at least the first practicum ought to expose the student to a broad array of diverse clients. This is particularly true in undergraduate practicums.

Students who either have been employed in social service agencies or have extensive volunteer experience will generally be given placements where greater responsibility, knowledge, or judgment are required. Students who have had little or no exposure to social services will often be assigned to agencies where lack of previous experience will not be a disadvantage or a disservice to clients.

Less experienced students are not necessarily placed in situations where there will be limited exposure to client systems. These students can still expect significant contact, but in settings where there will be ample structure and supervision (e.g., assisting in a day treatment program for the chronically mentally ill). More experienced students will be able to function in situations where there is less structure or direct supervision. An example would be a respite program for senior citizens where (after a brief orientation period) students would be expected to travel to clients' homes to conduct assessments for the program.

In making assignments to agencies, faculty field liaisons also consider the individual student. A student who gives the appearance of being unorganized or immature will most likely be placed in a less challenging practicum than a student considered organized, mature, and responsible. Of course, other traits or characteristics may also influence the faculty field liaison's decision. For instance, a confident and assertive student might be placed in a setting such as a locked psychiatric ward of a large hospital before a timid student would be.

Other factors that can affect the field placement include the student's unique learning style, characteristics, or disability, and can involve the faculty field liaison's contacts in the community. A faculty field liaison who is well known in the community may receive requests for students from local social service agencies. These requests can be rather specific. An agency with a shortage of male therapists

might request a male student who enjoys working with adolescents. An after-school or day treatment program for children might request a student who is athletic and able to participate in strenuous sports such as swimming and backpacking. If you then come along with prior experience in scouting, recreational programming, or camping, the faculty field liaison could see you as a solution to meeting the agency's request. Faculty field liaisons know it is important to find students who meet social service agencies' needs so the training opportunities afforded by these agencies will continue to be available to future social work students. Such considerations may be responsible for students not getting their first, but a second or third, choice of a practicum.

### ***What Specifically Are Social Service Agencies Looking for in Student Interns?***

When interviewing students who are seeking practicum placements, agency supervisors tend to look for several characteristics: First is a strong desire on the part of the student to help others. Second is the student's interest and ability to deal with specific knowledge and skills relative to particular problem areas. Third is emotional maturity. Each of these will be briefly discussed.

#### **A Strong Desire to Help Others**

Most agency supervisors believe that the basic quality practicum students must have is a burning desire to help others. This desire should be a driving force in students' lives—they must feel it enough to keep trying even when it appears that a client wants to fail. Students must have a high tolerance for frustration. Social work can be discouraging, and students must be strongly motivated by the belief that clients want to help themselves. One agency supervisor explained,

It is crucial to have the ability to be empathic with clients—to genuinely believe that clients are good people. Students must believe that clients love their children, that parents want to do what is best, and want to be appreciated. Without these beliefs, there is no way to make a social worker out of a student.

Agencies are looking for students who are determined, enthusiastic, and have genuine empathy for people. When a student displays attitudes that show condescension, you can be sure empathy is lacking. Students with empathy are easy to talk with, are good listeners, and are not cynical. They understand the client's world and the meaning it has for the client, both cognitively and emotionally.

The client perceives the [student] acting in response to empathetic understanding when, in the client's words, "He was able to see and feel things in exactly the same way I do." "Many of the things she said just seemed to hit the nail on the head."

"He understood my words but also how I felt." "When I did not know what I meant at all clearly, she still understood me." (Kadushin, 1990, p. 52)

### **Interest and Ability to Function in a Particular Setting**

Agency interviewers seek students with genuine interest in the problem areas with which their organization deals. For example, an interest in addiction treatment is best displayed by a genuine desire to understand the human experience of addiction. Social service agencies do not want students who are fascinated by the complexity of clients' problems but who lack real interest in wanting to help them. Agencies want a student whose concern for a fellow human being is motivated by *both* an intellectual curiosity about the problem and a compassionate desire to help.

Particularly at the graduate level, agency supervisors may look for knowledge and skills in specific areas. For instance, a substance abuse treatment agency may expect students to already understand the disease model of alcoholism. Students seeking a macro or administrative placement may be expected by some agencies to have acquired knowledge of their clientele by having previously worked directly with these clients.

### **Maturity**

Many agency supervisors try to assess the intellectual and emotional maturity displayed by a practicum applicant. Intellectually and emotionally mature individuals have achieved a balance between self-directed activity and a knowledge about the limitations of their competence. This is frequently displayed when applicants have formulated some clear objectives and are willing to seek advice and ask questions—even to say, "I don't understand."

### **Honesty**

More and more agencies are fingerprinting new employees and running background checks with the police. If you have been arrested, this may or may not be a problem with your practicum agency depending on the type of offense and the length of time that has passed. Honesty is usually the best policy in these matters and maturity is demonstrated when you are able to reveal this type of information rather than leading agency personnel to believe you have never been in trouble with the law. If you have been arrested for a serious offense, you should discuss this with your faculty field liaison before going for interviews. You might also want to read the response to "Is it Wise to Admit My Weaknesses?" in Chapter 3.

Although agencies can have certain expectations about the qualities students need to possess before beginning an internship, the enthusiasm and interest you bring may have a strong influence. Also, it is often important to get ready

for your interview by jotting down a few ideas about why you want to work with a particular group of clients, how you have prepared yourself for the practicum, and examples demonstrating past responsibilities you have handled. See also the topic in Chapter 3 "How Do I Prepare for the Practicum Interview?"

### *Case Example*

You have a friend, Heather, in the social work program. Heather always seems to be too busy for her own good. Typically, she runs a day or two late in turning in major assignments. She is working full time and also going to school full time. She seems to be getting only four or five hours of sleep each night. Still, she is active in several volunteer organizations around town. Heather tells the faculty field liaison that she is working only part time on weekends.

Possibly because she failed to note it on her calendar, Heather missed a day she was scheduled to work at her practicum agency. The next time she appeared, her field instructor inquired whether she had been too ill to call in. Heather was momentarily flustered as she tried to recall what she had been doing. Not wanting the field instructor to know that she was really working a full-time job, Heather made up a flimsy excuse.

Heather also had a problem turning in required agency paperwork within the deadlines her field instructor gave. Now, at the midterm evaluation, the field instructor is suggesting to the faculty field liaison that Heather be terminated. Heather is confused, hurt, and angry. She has been trying her best, she thinks, although she dislikes the clients she has to work with.

#### *Questions*

1. What do you consider to be Heather's biggest problem?
2. What could Heather have done to improve her situation in the agency?

### *How Will the Agency Evaluate My Performance as a Student Intern?*

Although the evaluation procedures used by different agencies and social work programs vary widely, you can expect that your field instructor will be looking at your progress during the placement. Field instructors often use prepared forms or scales to rate students on their knowledge, skills, and social work values. These forms may be supplied by your faculty field liaison or may have been developed at the agency. Field instructors generally discuss their written evaluations with students or give students the opportunity to review their comments and respond. In some programs, faculty field liaisons attend the evaluation session. During your orientation to the agency or to the field practicum, you may be given a copy of the evaluation form that will be used. If a copy is not supplied, ask for one so that you can be familiar with the areas in which you will be expected to show improvement. (More discussion of this topic is provided in Chapter 4.)

In addition to the skills and knowledge you are expected to acquire, certain other qualities are necessary. Foremost are good attendance and being

on time for your appointments and scheduled days. You may be considered unreliable if your attendance is poor (even if you have good excuses). Other qualities that agencies like in student interns include a pleasant disposition, willingness to work (sometimes expressed as interest in helping others when not busy with your own assignments), a sense of humor, sensible (businesslike) appearance, and sincerity in learning. Furthermore, agencies want students who are in control of their emotions, who are calm and objective (even under stressful conditions), who have good judgment, and who are appropriately assertive.

Most field instructors will rate more highly those student interns who have qualities that would make them good employees once the practicum is finished. As suggested earlier, these would be individuals who get along easily with their coworkers and clients, who are hardworking, conscientious, and responsible. Student interns who are willing to help out no matter what the task, and those considered to be an asset to the agency (perhaps because they have developed a special expertise or have found a niche for themselves in the agency), are favored by field instructors and agency administrators.

Here are some other guidelines to help you get along with your field instructor and other staff within the agency:

- Do not try to impress agency workers with vocabulary that you have just learned.
- When you communicate in writing, use good grammar and spelling and try to write legibly. (If you can't spell well, don't guess—use a dictionary or spellchecker faithfully.)
- Listen carefully to any instructions given to you the first time and make notes if necessary. Do not make a practice of going back to the agency supervisor on multiple occasions to ask for information that has already been given to you. However, if you need further instructions or information to complete your assignments, then it is more responsible to ask for help than to finish an assignment incorrectly.
- Do not give your field instructor the impression that you are picky about the assignments you will take. If you are not being given enough work, don't be afraid to ask for additional duties.
- Once you have been given responsibility for something, then carry it out. Do not draw out tasks; do not forget assignments.
- Be on time and keep appointments.
- If you borrow something, then return it. Show consideration to others. Do not leave a mess for others to clean.
- If there are personality clashes or personnel problems within the agency, try not to get involved. Avoid agency gossip or discussion that you perceive to be about the faults or flaws of selected agency employees.
- If you develop a significant problem with a coworker within the agency, then share this information with your faculty field liaison as soon as possible.



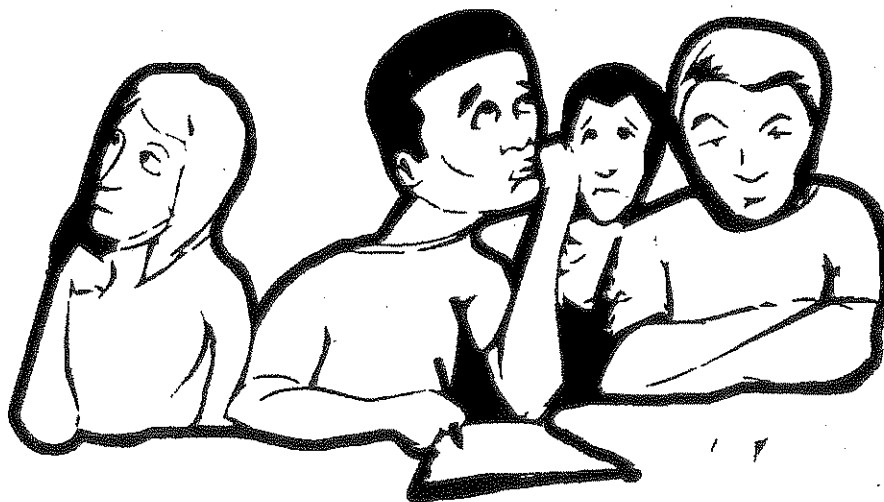
Conform to the National Association of Social Workers' Code of Ethics (1996)—do not engage in unethical behavior.

- Keep a positive attitude. Even if the agency does not conform to your ideal image, considerable learning can occur in every practicum. If you have decided (or even if you and your faculty field liaison have decided) that a different placement is necessary next semester, do not adopt the attitude that you will do just enough to get by. (One worthwhile reason to try your best is that you might want your field instructor to write a good letter of reference for a future job.)

If you truly want to learn and to help the clientele of your agency, then you will almost certainly meet most of the agency's performance standards and receive a positive evaluation.

### *What Do I Do if the Field Instructor Becomes Incapacitated?*

Occasionally, events such as accidents, illnesses, or planned absences may mean that your field instructor is unable to continue with your supervision. Your field instructor and faculty field liaison should have enough time to make alternative arrangements for planned absences (e.g., vacations). However, your faculty field liaison may not always know when your field instructor is unavailable to supervise you because of unplanned absences such as an accident or illness. In this situation, it is your responsibility to inform your faculty field liaison of such absences—particularly when it is likely that more than one supervisory session will be missed.



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### Ideas for Enriching the Practicum Experience

1. What characteristics or features of a social service agency do you think are essential for it to be a practicum setting for social work students? Jot down your ideas and compare them with the ideas of your fellow students enrolled in the integrating seminar. Alternatively, save your list and examine it at the end of the placement to see if any of your ideas have changed.
2. If you were the supervisor of students in a social service agency, what kinds of attitudes, abilities, and knowledge would you expect them to acquire during their field instruction? How close do these come to the criteria that will be used to evaluate you? Obtain a copy of the evaluation form that your field instructor or faculty field liaison will use and compare.
3. Determine if your social work program keeps students' evaluations of their practicum agencies. If so, read student remarks about the agencies that interest you. Which sound like serious concerns? If your program does not systematically collect evaluations on the practicum settings, determine if there is enough interest to begin gathering this information at the end of each academic term.
4. What agencies are used most often for practicum settings by your social work program? Are different agencies used for undergraduate and graduate field experiences? Is there a good balance in terms of fields of service (e.g., child welfare, mental health, gerontology)?
5. If the résumés for the field instructors used by your social work program are available, examine several to understand the diversity and richness of their experiences and special expertise. Do you see yourself having a similar résumé in another eight to ten years? Make a list of your career goals.

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