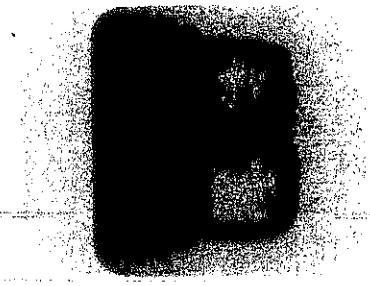

Getting Started

OVERVIEW

Most students want their practicum experiences to be instructive, exciting, and gratifying. But before the practicum can start, the student often must be interviewed in the agency. Even if an interview is not required, the student is likely to be a little nervous about getting off on the right foot and making a good impression. This chapter provides some suggestions for students preparing to go into an agency for the first time.

How Do I Find an Agency that Meets My Needs?

The amount of student input allowed in the choice of a practicum agency varies immensely. On the one extreme, in some social work programs, students are not just permitted to contact agencies and interview on their own, but are expected to do so. Students in these programs often talk to other students and faculty members about which agencies provide the best learning experiences. If, for some reason, you are unable to secure a placement in one of the agencies most often recommended (possibly because they already have their quota of students), you may want to look through the Yellow Pages of your phone directory (or even the directories of neighboring counties if travel time isn't an issue). Under such headings as "Counselors," "Social Service Organizations," "Marriage Counseling," "Mental Health Services," or "Alcohol Abuse & Addiction" you are likely to find more agencies than you had imagined. In addition, your local United Way will have a list of agencies it funds, and it may produce a directory of community resources. Such a publication would likely

contain more information about individual agencies than you would find in the Yellow Pages. Check in the reference section of your library.

In programs at the other extreme, students are assigned an agency and have little choice. Most programs allow students to state preferences even if they are not actively involved in the selection process. Correspondingly, most agencies want to interview prospective students before agreeing to accept them for a placement.

Even if your program does not allow you to choose your practicum agency, there are several important topics to consider as you plan for a practicum. Occasionally students or agencies have special requirements, and discussing them with your faculty field liaison will result in a better learning experience. Here are a few examples.

Transportation

Getting to and from the agency can be a problem for students without a car. Students need to consider how close the agency is located to where they live and go to class. Many agencies are located near college campuses and are easy to reach. Others are some distance away and require ownership of a car, availability of public transportation, or arrangements for car pooling with other students or employees.

If you have a car or access to one, some agencies may ask you to use your car to transport clients or make home visits. Other agencies have cars available for student use. If you are required to drive an agency car, you might want to ask your agency supervisor about the extent of insurance coverage needed to protect you in case of an accident. If you drive your own car, you need to check with your insurance agent about your liability coverage.

Scheduling

Agencies differ with regard to hours of operation, from those open only a few days per week (this is often the case with new agencies or those that operate almost entirely with volunteers) to those that provide intervention 24 hours per day, seven days per week.

Some students can be very flexible as they plan their agency time. Others must work around job responsibilities and family commitments and are far less adaptable. Agencies are aware of these differences, and although some are able to accommodate students' schedules, others simply cannot. Students whose schedules are restricted must find agencies that are open at times they can work.

Even if your schedule appears to have no complications (e.g., your classes are on Tuesdays and Thursdays and the agency agrees to accept you as a student on Mondays, Wednesdays, and Fridays), be alert to potential problems such as staff meetings on Tuesday afternoons—a day when you are not scheduled to be in the agency. This circumstance would probably necessitate that you consider a different agency because staff meetings are an important experience in professional socialization. In staff meetings students can observe how the agency operates, how

professionals interact with one another, and learn what problems are facing the agency and how they will be resolved.

Supervision

Some students want agency expectations laid out in clear and behaviorally specific terms. They want to know what to do, when to do it, and how to do it. They do not like wondering whether or not they are meeting agency expectations. One student explained,

> Prior to my first day at work, I was surprised to find that I was feeling anxious. My anxiety was based on a fear that there might be little or no structure, that I might have to roam aimlessly, searching for assignments and feeling generally uncomfortable with my new situation.

Other students want a setting in which they can observe for a while, determine what they would like to do, and then begin to use all of their creative and problem-solving capabilities in a task of their choosing.

When selecting an agency, it is important to consider the amount of supervision you require. The next step is to share this preference with your faculty field liaison. From prior experience with other students, your faculty field liaison will know which agencies allow employees, students, and volunteers the most freedom and which provide greater supervision. At a minimum, the Council on Social Work Education requires that all students meet with their supervisors for at least one hour per week.

One undergraduate student, who was placed in an unstructured environment with little supervision, arrived at a day-care center for high-risk children and was told that 15 toddlers were in the next room. She was instructed to go and assist in any way she could. A second undergraduate working in an agency that distributed food to 16 outlying food pantries was given a detailed questionnaire and asked to interview one social worker at each site to gather information on anticipated food requirements. Still a third undergraduate, in a very structured setting, walked into her agency supervisor's office and was given a schedule of training sessions to be held that week for all hospital student interns. She was assigned specific areas of the hospital in which to work, specific tasks to complete, deadlines by which to accomplish the assignments, and a schedule of supervisory conferences. She was told to begin reading hospital policies and logs of former students. Later, she viewed a video on the hospital's history and projected future.

These examples show how problems might develop for students who want a lot of supervision and who do not get it, or who like to work on their own but whose agency supervisors closely observe and direct their activities. It is important to communicate your preference concerning the degree of supervision, or problems may quickly arise and continue throughout the placement. What you want in a supervisor is a supportive, enthusiastic, knowledgeable person who is interested in helping you to have a good learning experience. A good supervisor

will not abandon or ignore you, will find interesting assignments for you, and will be available for your questions.

Agencies vary widely with regard to what they will allow students to do. Some schedule immediate contact with clients; others do not allow students to have client interaction without supervision until the second semester. One graduate student told a class of undergraduates going into the field for the first time, "Be prepared for the possibility of spending the initial weeks in your agencies doing nothing but observing." She noted that as a second-year graduate student, with six years of social work experience and one graduate practicum completed, she was told by her new field instructor that for the first month her only assignment was to observe others at work. The second month she could interview clients but only with another social worker present. Finally, at the start of her third month, assuming things went to the supervisor's satisfaction, she could practice alone.

Most agencies are not this stringent in their supervision of students and present students with opportunities to interact with clients early in their internships—sometimes even in the first week. This occurs at both the graduate and undergraduate levels. The variation in students' direct contact with clients can be explained by many factors, among them the staff-client ratio, the complexity of the students' tasks, and the consequences of students making poor judgments.

Populations, Problem Areas, and Networking

Ideally, students should find placements where they can learn about populations and problem areas that excite them. The agency you select should capture your interests and challenge you to become actively involved. Although it is possible to learn something in any placement, students are most energized when they can immediately immerse themselves in a setting where they easily relate to the primary client group present (e.g., preschoolers, adolescents, elderly) or are curious about the problems with which the agency deals (e.g., chemical dependency, teenage runaways, spouse abuse, juvenile offenders, the terminally ill). Especially before the first placement, students should reflect on what their areas of interest are and which age groups they interact with best.

Agencies that do more networking are more interrelated with other agencies, and thus provide a broader practicum experience. Students who want to learn about other social service organizations and the interactions among them should consider how much networking a particular agency does. For example, a family counseling agency that works almost entirely with middle income families may have little cause to work with other agencies in the community. On the other hand, an agency that works with pregnant teens will make connections with social insurance agencies, county or state social service departments, health departments, hospital social service departments, childbirth education organizations, legal services, and residential facilities. Students interested in maximizing their knowledge about other agencies and community resources would receive more of this type of learning in the latter example.

Agency Value Base

Another area for students to consider is an agency's value base. Once students identify the core values of a potential field agency, they should decide whether it creates a conflict with their own. For example, a student who believes that abortion is morally wrong will have a difficult time working in a setting where clients are often referred for abortions. Likewise, a student whose religious ethic is opposed to divorce may have difficulties in a setting where persons are frequently supported in leaving their spouses.

Often our clients' values may not be the same as ours. As professionals, we learn to accept individual clients as worthwhile persons although we may not condone their every behavior. Although it is important to know our strongly held values and to examine them from time to time, it is also worth remembering that values are not permanently fixed. Many people, particularly those acquiring college degrees, are continually updating the facts that form the foundation for their opinions and values. A 19-year-old undergraduate may strongly believe in the death penalty, thinking that certain incarcerated individuals deserve this punishment. With this value, that student may not be very successful in some criminal justice placements. However, a short time later, the same student may have learned that the poor and minorities have a much greater likelihood of ending up on death row. Seeing the evidence of racism within the legal system, the student may now view the death penalty quite differently.

In the process of obtaining a social work education, students become aware of their own basic values and the values of the profession, and they are challenged to understand the impact of their values on their interactions with others. Personal and professional growth occur when we examine our values and the stereotypes we hold. However, students should not be forced to act against their basic principles. In such a situation or at any time when you cannot be objective, you should inform your field instructor and discuss transferring or referring the case. If this poses any problem, a three-way meeting with your faculty field liaison, field instructor, and you should be convened.

How Do I Prepare for the Practicum Interview?

Anticipation of the initial interview with a prospective agency supervisor can produce anxiety. One undergraduate student recalled,

> I phoned the executive director of the agency and arranged for an interview. In the day or two before I was to see her, I unexpectedly discovered that I was feeling quite nervous. Upon examining my feelings, I found that I feared such things as: They won't like me. I won't like them. They will find my dress too casual. I will find them too snooty. All of these fears could be categorized under a basic "fear of the unknown."

> To my surprise, the interview went very well. The director talked about the agency and its purpose and her ideas about students' roles. She asked me about my background and interest in social work and she shared some personal experiences about her own agency work. Before I knew it, an hour had passed. It was a relief to know rapport had definitely been established between us.

Not all first interviews go nearly as well. One student recalled how she was caught totally off guard:

> When I was interviewing for a practicum placement last semester, I was asked what would seem to be a simple question. However, the manner in which the question was asked intimidated me. The interviewer, a stern looking middle-aged clinical social worker, folded her hands, looked me straight in the eye, and asked, "Yesterday I interviewed another student. Tell me why I should choose you over other students?" I remember frantically trying to think of a good reason. I'm sure my voice was shaking when I asked her to repeat the question (I wanted to stall for time). I ended up giving her two or three reasons, none of which sounded very convincing to me. From then on I was unnerved. When I left the interview, that question was about the only thing I could remember!

Although there is no way to guarantee that your first interview with a potential agency supervisor will be a fun experience, a few steps can be taken to increase the likelihood of a positive experience. Many people find it hard to speak extemporaneously about their strengths, weaknesses, qualifications, career goals, skills, and abilities. For example, some students may find it difficult to answer the following questions:

- What led you to social work?
- Why do you think you are qualified to be a student intern at this agency?
- How would you describe yourself?
- What talents do you have?
- What do you plan on doing five or ten years from now?
- What skills can you bring to our agency?
- Why should we consider you as a student intern?
- What problems do you think will be most difficult for you to deal with in this agency setting?

Yet these questions and others may be asked during your interview. Fortunately, you can prepare for questions such as these.

Making a detailed self-assessment is one way to prepare for an interview. You should be able to describe traits and skills that contribute to your uniqueness. You might begin by compiling a list of flattering adjectives that characterize you (e.g., ambitious, trustworthy, reliable, compassionate, intellectual). Next, narrow the list to three or four items that summarize your personality. Use examples to illustrate particular attributes (e.g., one undergraduate described himself as "committed" and then explained how he continued working for a summer youth camp during a three-week period when funding shortages meant he did not receive any pay). Once you have specific attributes and examples in mind, it is fairly easy to respond to the request, "describe yourself."

Trace skills (e.g., the ability to work in stressful situations) to concrete, specific experiences. Describe a particular experience to show how you have used this skill (e.g., you managed an office for two weeks by yourself while other office personnel were on leave). You should be deliberate in describing a strength relative to the position sought (e.g., knowledge of medical terminology when seeking a practicum within a hospital setting). As attorneys do in a courtroom, you want to "build a case," that is, present "evidence" that you actually possess the traits and skills you say you have.

What Can I Do to Deemphasize Little or No Work Experience?

Both graduate and undergraduate students worry that they will be asked about their lack of practical experience. This anxiety sometimes blocks the memory of experiences that are related to the demands of the desired practicum. To avoid overlooking relevant experiences, consider your significant past activities before the interview. Perhaps you did volunteer work, were employed in a family business, or were a member of a community service or school organization. Next, make a list of the skills you needed to complete assignments in those settings. You are now ready to link your past with what the current agency needs.

Begin by telling the interviewer what you have done in the past. Next, use a transitional statement to link the past to the present. An undergraduate student gave the following example:

> As leader of my daughter's Girl Scout troop for two years, I coordinated group activities for eight- and nine-year-olds. I found I was organized and creative. I think I would be able to build upon this experience when working here in the after-school program.

Even jobs that were not social work related (e.g., working in a supermarket) show that you have learned how to balance schoolwork and other responsibilities, and more likely than not, you picked up valuable skills in working with people.

Case Example

A student in one of your classes begins to share some personal material with you. She was a victim of severe child abuse and reared by foster parents. Although she has never received any individual counseling, she now wants to do a practicum that will place her on a treatment team for children who have been sexually abused. Previously, other students who have completed a practicum with this agency have told you how intense and stressful their placement was. The student who wants to go to this agency hints that such a field experience will be "therapeutic" for her.

Questions

1. Do you think her plan for a practicum is a good one?
2. Would you advise her to choose a different practicum?
3. On what might your decision depend?
4. Would it be a good idea for the student to inform her field instructor and faculty field liaison of her prior history?

Is It Wise to Admit My Weaknesses?

In an interview, agency supervisors may ask potential student interns to describe their weaknesses. Questions such as these are asked: What weaknesses do you have? What aspect of this placement do you think will be the most difficult? What is the biggest hindrance you will have to deal with if we select you as a student intern? To prepare for this type of question, consider any potential weaknesses you may have and then rehearse a response using one of the following approaches.

One method is to accentuate the positive. One student remembered,

> When asked what my weaknesses were relative to the placement, I knew that I did not want to focus on any anticipated problems; so I said that I thought my organization, willingness, and flexibility would enable me to handle any difficult situations I might encounter.

A second approach is to state a weakness and then reframe it into a trait that is positive. One student did this in an interview by saying, "Some people would say that I push myself too hard but I like to think of myself as someone who strives for excellence." As another example of reframing, a student said, "People may think I do not grasp things quickly enough, but I spend a lot of time trying to completely understand. I find this often helps me to save time in the long run."

A third way to deal with the subject of weaknesses is to explain how you are working on a particular liability and illustrate specific instances in which you have been encouraged by progress. During a practicum interview, a student explained that she gets very nervous speaking in front of a group. She is working on this by taking a public speaking course.

Occasionally, students have questions about whether or not medical diagnoses should be mentioned during an interview at an agency. A student with

epilepsy informed his faculty field liaison of this, and together they were able to find a placement where staff were well-prepared if the student had a seizure. Had the agency supervisor not known that the student's medical condition was the reason for his reluctance to do certain work (e.g., transporting clients), the supervisor might have thought the student was uncooperative.

If you are presently in counseling for an emotional problem, or have been in the recent past, it may be wise to share this information with the faculty field liaison so that the two of you can decide on the best placement for you. It generally is not advised, for instance, for victims of incest or sexual abuse to begin counseling others with the same problem until considerable progress has been made in their own treatment. Similarly, students from alcoholic families should be pretty far into their own recovery before seeking to work intensively with alcoholic clients. Sharing this type of information with the faculty field liaison does not indicate any weakness on your part; it shows maturity and good judgment in dealing with a sometimes painful reality.

How much personal information about students should be shared with agencies is a thorny dilemma for faculty field liaisons. For example, if a student has a criminal record, fails to inform the agency of this, and then violates the law again (either harming clients, putting clients at risk, or causing the agency bad publicity), the issue of liability is raised. Disclosing certain types of information will undoubtedly induce some agencies to reject a student. Many require a criminal records check. Agencies must take reasonable precautions to protect their clients.

In general, students should advise their faculty field liaisons of medical conditions or other situations that could affect their agency work or have repercussions for the agency. The faculty field liaison and the student can then jointly decide whether and to what degree to inform the agency. There are no simple rules on this matter; the advantages and disadvantages of revealing personally sensitive information must be weighed in each individual situation. It is always a delicate issue, but it can be handled successfully with adequate planning.

Consider the following example of how to inform an agency about these matters:

> A student who was on medication for bipolar disorder discussed this with her faculty field liaison, and the two of them decided on an agency where she would learn needed skills and also receive supervision from an understanding and perceptive agency supervisor. No exceptional information was given to the agency supervisor ahead of time. The student went through the interview the same as any student would, and she and the agency supervisor developed good rapport during the interview. As the interview was drawing to a close, the agency supervisor announced that he was favorably impressed and informed the student that she could begin a placement with the agency. At that time, the student revealed her medication needs but added that she felt secure this would not present a problem to the agency. The supervisor asked a couple of questions for clarification. The student did

not go into a detailed history, but answered factually regarding her behavior when she was acting symptomatically and reassured the supervisor that over the past 18 months she had been functioning well—missing fewer days of school than others. The supervisor thanked the student for her honesty and began discussing when the student would be available to start the practicum.

In this example, information was not given ahead of time in order not to bias the supervisor against the student. Since the interview had gone well, the student felt comfortable in disclosing. Had the student felt that the interview was not going well and that it was unlikely that she would be invited to join the agency for a practicum, then the faculty field liaison and the student agreed that disclosure was not necessary.

How Should I Respond to Questions About My Educational Preparation?

In a practicum interview, you may be asked to explain how your classroom learning will apply to the particular agency setting. Although you cannot foresee every specific question that might be asked, you can prepare by anticipating related questions and mentally reviewing your educational preparation. The following example shows how a little preparation can give you poise and confidence:

A graduate student tried to locate a placement that would improve his counseling skills. He contacted an acquaintance at a local community mental health center and inquired about the possibility of an internship. The acquaintance, the director of the agency, seemed interested and supportive but suggested that the student attend the next "team" meeting at the center and make the request at that time. Not wishing to seem impolite, the student wondered why he would have to make the request a second time but did not seek further explanation. Since he and the director already knew each other from membership in a local organization, the student assumed that the way was smoothed for him to become an intern—only the details would need to be worked out.

On the appointed day, the naive student arrived bright and early but was made to wait outside of the meeting room until "agency business" was concluded. When the meeting ran late, the student began to suspect that team members were arguing about the merits of accepting him as an intern. Finally, after waiting 40 minutes, the student was invited to enter the meeting.

The director made the initial introductions and indicated that the student wanted to become an intern. Then he said, "Tell us something about yourself and your program." The student patiently spoke of his

career goals, hobbies, and so on. Somehow this did not seem to be what the team wanted. The student had thought that by now he would be at the end of the interview. However, one of the team members then said, "No, what we want to know is what theoretical approaches do you use when you counsel?" The student's mind raced. Systems theory, reality therapy, Gestalt, and psychoanalysis came to mind. He wondered if he really knew enough about any of them. After several false starts, the student said, "I think I'm eclectic."

The point of this illustration is that students should give prior thought to the types of things (e.g., their training or counseling frame of reference) that may interest the interviewer or interviewing staff in the prospective agency.

Interviewers ask questions about educational backgrounds for many reasons. They may be trying to assess intellectual abilities, breadth and depth of knowledge, or special interests or training. To get ready for any questioning along this line, think about your educational experience and then write down two or three courses that were valuable preparation for this specific practicum placement. Next, think of theories or concepts discussed in these courses and write down why you think each would be helpful. This exercise will enable you to go into the interview mindful of important concepts and theories. Interviewers will not expect you to recite an entire course syllabus. However, being able to recall two or three major theories and explain how they relate to the work of the agency would impress many interviewers.

What if the general questions are, "What kind of program do they run there at your university? Is it a good one?" To answer these questions, think about two or three aspects of your social work program that have given you good preparation. For example, some programs incorporate a social work course that requires students to perform a few hours of agency volunteer work each week. This educational experience helps a student know what to expect and what to do in a practicum and could be described as a program strength.

Be positive in describing the valuable learning acquired from your educational experience. An educational program that is described chiefly in negative terms may be seen by some interviewers as inadequately preparing you to function in their agency—as a student or as an employee.

How Should I Dress for the Practicum Agency?

As with many things in life, it is best to avoid extremes. Whether going for the first interview or reporting for work on the first day, you should not plan to make a fashion statement. Provocative dress will not be acceptable and may result in losing a placement that you desired. Generally speaking, dress conservatively, but neither too formally nor informally. If possible, visit the agency beforehand and observe what other staff members are wearing. If the staff dresses informally (men in sports shirts without ties; women in slacks and casual tops), then dress

similarly. If your supervisor and other staff are dressed a little fancier, then use them as models and dress appropriately. Do not wear jeans on the first interview. Later, if you become an intern there and learn that jeans are typical dress because of the agency population or setting (e.g., assisting clients in a sheltered workshop), then it is usually permissible to wear jeans. When in doubt, dress up a little more than you normally would for going to class.

Keep in mind, too, that clothes which would be considered attractive and stylish in a normal business office might be viewed as being provocative if, for example, you are working in a prison with male inmates. Plan your dress to avoid getting "noticed" and always ask ahead of time if you have questions about appropriate apparel.

How Do I Make a Good Impression?

Most initial interviews will last only 30 to 60 minutes. Use this time to make a positive impression by remembering a few simple but important details. First, plan to arrive 10 to 15 minutes early. It is always better to be early for an important appointment than to be late. If you plan to arrive early, then even unexpected delays can be absorbed without major problems.

Second, when you meet the prospective agency supervisor, look the person in the eyes and offer a firm handshake. Smile and show a genuine interest in the person. Take care to pronounce the supervisor's name correctly (if you are unsure, ask). Be prepared to spend the first few minutes making small talk. If you have not been keeping up with current events, read the local newspaper and a national magazine prior to your meeting. This can help to give you topics for discussion should the conversation move past your credentials. This could easily happen, for example, if your interview was scheduled for 11:15 and the agency supervisor invites you to lunch.

Third, be observant. Look around the office or room and note anything of particular interest to you. One student noticed a guitar sitting in a corner and quickly engaged the supervisor in a discussion about their shared interest in classical guitar. Meeting strangers is always a little difficult at first. By facilitating conversation with the interviewer, you can demonstrate a skill that will later be required with clients. You will leave a better impression if both you and the interviewer can speak comfortably than if you appear frightened and hesitant to talk.

Fourth, show enthusiasm. One way to do this is to ask questions. Do not be completely passive and think your role is only to wait for questions. Ask questions about the agency, the staff, the clientele, how long the supervisor has been with the agency, and so on. You can ask what formal training is given to students, how student performance is appraised, and what student responsibilities are. Furthermore, you can inquire about what staff you will be working with, the primary functions of the office, and the expected working hours.

Students can usually generate interesting discussion if they have acquired some basic information about the agency before the interview, such as:

- The relative size of the agency (Has it added or lost staff recently?)
- Its organizational auspices (Is it a private or public agency? From where do most of its funds come?)
- The array of services provided to clients (Who is the "typical" client?)
- Recent news pertaining to the organization (Have there been any recent newspaper articles?)

During the interview, show congruence between your verbal and nonverbal communication. Modulate your voice to maintain the interviewer's attention and be sure to keep appropriate posture. Try to avoid saying what you will not do (e.g., "I will *never* work past 4:30"); rather, emphasize your congeniality and flexibility.

Finally, keep in mind that many agency supervisors are asking questions in the hopes of answering the following:

- What can you do for the agency?
- How long will it take you to become productive?
- What do you want from the agency?
- Can you handle stress?
- Can you get along with others?

By anticipating questions that interviewers are likely to ask and by knowing the "hidden agenda," there is a better chance that you will leave a good impression than if you go unprepared.

A day or two after your interview, it would be a nice touch to drop the potential field instructor a brief thank-you note in the mail expressing appreciation for interviewing you. If you schedule three or four interviews, and each agency offers you the opportunity to come there and be an intern, it is always expected that as soon as you have made a decision you will call and inform the other agencies. They may be waiting to hear from you before committing to any other students. Once again, thank them for their interest and assistance.

Getting Oriented—What Can I Expect on the First Day?

Agencies prepare for and use students in enormously different ways. Two accounts illustrate this:

> The first day in one of my graduate practicums another student and I were handed a scrapbook of clippings about the agency and instructed to familiarize ourselves with the agency's range of activities.