



ILLINOIS

UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT URBANA-CHAMPAIGN

Developing a Comprehensive
Orientation for
Student Internships

When developing an internship orientation, multiple variables should be considered. The primary consideration is the student's learning needs. Students come to the internship with varying amounts of experience. Some students are employed at the agency where they are completing their internship, other students have several years of human service experience in either one or multiple settings, and some students, about 60% of students from our program, enter the MSW program directly from a bachelors program with little or no paid social work experience. Some of the students coming directly from an undergraduate program may have completed an internship as part of their undergraduate degree or have volunteer experience. It is important to keep in mind the student's learning curve when they start the placement and provide an orientation that is appropriate to their needs. One of the reasons that we have students prepare a lengthy educational resume is to provide the field instructor with as much information as possible on what the student brings to the internship. The cover letter provides the field instructor with an idea of their learning interests and their experience. This information should provide the field instructor with an idea to the extent that student will need to be oriented to the internship site and to social work practice.

The size of the agency or unique features of an agency will influence the orientation content. A small agency with one or two programs will be different than an orientation for a large social service agency that has multiple programs that are run out of several offices throughout the state or country.

Internship sites such as hospitals, school districts and some large social service agencies typically have the student attend the employee orientation. In addition, the field instructor will provide an orientation specific to the school(s) or the area in the hospital where the student will be placed.

In hospitals and schools where social workers practice in a host site, orientation is generally less formal than in mental health settings and child welfare agencies. In hospitals and schools students tend to shadow the field instructor so the orientation and supervision is ongoing until the student develops independence. In other agency settings, orientation might also be fluid overtime but presented during regularly scheduled meetings or trainings rather than ongoing shadowing. Some of that training might be with someone other than the field instructor.

One thing that we know for sure is that the students, no matter where they are on the learning curve enter the internship with anxiety. From the least experienced to the most experienced student, there is anxiety. We see the anxiety developing during the planning process as students negotiate the learning experiences. The inexperienced student's anxiety may come from not knowing what to expect and feelings of inadequacy where an experienced student's anxiety may be around the changing role of a knowledgeable worker to a student learner.

Orientation to Practicum

The school plays a role in the responsibility of orientation to the agency and student. The Field Education manual contains rules, guidelines, policies and procedures for all aspects of the field process. The manual is available to all students on-line on the

School's website and is available on Compass, the web based program used during the Internship Seminar Class. New field instructors are provided a copy of the field manual and the manual is available to all field instructors on the School's website. New field instructors are required to complete the New Field Instructor Training. All field instructors are encouraged to complete training offered by the Field Education Office such as this training or the program offered on Field Education Day.

Orienting the Student to Practicum

The Assistant Dean and the Director of Field Education meet individually with all students when they start the MSW program. The purpose of this meeting is to make sure that students have chosen the correct specialization and to assess interests and geographic preference for internship. Each fall students are invited to participate in Field Education Day. In the morning of Field Education Day students participate in a program that provides information on the field process. In the afternoon students have the opportunity to talk to agencies about potential learning experiences. We also offer students the opportunity to participate in informational meetings one day per week at the beginning of the semester, prior to starting their internship. The informational meeting outlines the field process, structure, preparing them for the individual field meeting with a field faculty, preparation of cover letters and resumes, interviewing with agencies, confirming an internship and notifying the field office of the internship site. Each student participates in an individual planning conference where students identify their learning interests and the field faculty provide information on agencies that match their learning

interests. This meeting also provides an opportunity for the faculty to provide feedback on the student's cover letter and resume.

Orienting Field Instructors and Agencies to Practicum

When an agency is contacted by the Field Education Office for the first time to inquire about an internship possibility, the orientation process begins. The faculty liaison will discuss the program requirements, appropriate learning experiences and requirements for supervision. Agencies interested in becoming placement sites are provided with an "Overview of the MSW Program" which details the school's mission, practicum structure, and roles and responsibilities of all parties. Once a student has confirmed an internship and notified the field office, the field instructor is sent a confirmation packet which includes: copies of the syllabus for the student's specialization area, field instructor profile, learning plans appropriate for the specialization, timeline when documents are due, and new field instructors are notified of field education training.

Developing an Agency Orientation

An orientation serves multiple purposes. As with employees, an orientation welcomes the student to the internship site. As noted earlier in this paper, students begin internships with anxiety and fears, providing students with information about the agency aids in reducing some of these feelings. The first few days at the internship can impact the student's feelings about the agency throughout the placement period. When students do not receive an adequate orientation of the agency, they may spend a large amount of time seeking out information on their own in order to practice and thus taking time away

from the learning process. Research by Knight, 2001 found that students provided with reading materials in the beginning of the internship reported that the information provided an enhanced learning experience (Dettlaff, 2003).

Orientation is the beginning of the student's socialization to the profession of social work. The internship site should provide students with information on their values, standards and expectations for behavior. The orientation is also the beginning of the development of a relationship between the internship site and the student.

Agencies that are interested in providing Social Work internships for students should develop an orientation prior to taking on the commitment. This section will suggest materials that might be included in the orientation process. Content of the orientation will be dependent on factors related to the agency's resources, structure, size and mission. Keep in mind that students will also be required to complete an assignment in the seminar class on the organizational structure of the internship site, so they will be seeking agency information to complete that assignment.

Some agencies provide student manuals while others use a checklist of materials to be covered during the orientation. During the mid-term evaluation the field liaison will ask the student to describe the orientation process. Students that have a checklist are able to reflect on the list to recall the topics/materials used in the process.

Prior to Intern's Arrival

- Inform staff of intern
- Educate staff on the role of an intern
- Identify tasks and assignments for intern
- Discuss with staff formal and informal supervision
- Prepare physical space
- Prepare orientation

- Identify training needs and materials
- If the agency has multiple programs, schedule a time with program directors to meet and explain their programs to the intern

Internship Begins

Physical Space and Office Procedures

- Orient student to physical space, where the student will be placed, bathroom, lunch facilities, where they will see clients, etc.
- If the student is not from the community, the field instructor might provide a tour of the community identifying resources that might be used by the student during the internship
- Introduce students to all staff
- Have office staff orient student to office procedures
 - Phone usage
 - Long distance calls
 - Signing in and out
 - Lunch breaks
 - Dress code
 - Parking
 - Reimbursement for travel and procedures for reimbursement
 - Scheduling clients
 - Office machines
 - Any specific insurance required
 - Security precautions
 - Policy on making and taking personal phone calls
 - Agency hours for business
- Computer system, if used
- Description of the organizational culture
- Parking facilities and rules
- Dress requirements
- Special security precautions

Orienting to Agency

- Mission statement/goals
- Annual report
- Brochures, public information literature on agency
- Website
- Organizational Chart
- Job descriptions
- Agency lingo/terminology
- Policy and Procedures Manuals
- Reporting lines—staffing hierarchy

- Funding sources
- Personnel Manual

Orienting to Practicum

- Discuss confidentiality policies and procedures
- Orient student to documentation used in the agency
- Orient to record keeping
- Discuss intern's role and expectations
- Describe expectations for supervision and establish a set weekly supervision time
- Formulate a plan to develop the learning plan
- Provide relevant reading materials
- Discuss a plan for student to become familiar with community resources
- Discuss opportunities where student can observe the work of the agency
- State clearly how the student should identify themselves in writing and orally
- Discuss teaching and learning style issues
- If the students is required to do evening hours, discuss flex-time

Remember, the orientation is the beginning of the student's learning. A thorough orientation will aid in decreasing student anxiety and will begin to make them feel like part of the organization.