

## Field Note: A Macro-Level Field Experience

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### **Abstract**

*Undergraduate field experiences in social services commonly require that students work with clients. This article describes a required undergraduate field placement which focused on the structure and function of social service organizations. The two-semester field placement exposed students to management practices, program development, organization mission, logic models, policies and procedures, budgets, diversity, board roles, and use of technology. Student projects involving activities such as grant-writing, evaluation research, fundraising, developing manuals, and marketing were also completed. Based on reports from students, satisfaction with this type of field placement is discussed.*

### **Introduction**

It is widely accepted that academic degrees in the human services should have a field component where work with clients is the primary focus. There are reasons, however, to consider expanding students' understanding of direct service to include the context in which direct service is provided. Students who understand the infrastructure of the human service workplace are more likely to contribute to the advancement of their organizations in future employment (Proehl, 2004). In addition, acquiring a critical consciousness of an organization and the self-in-the-organization can contribute to its success (Kegan, 1994). A field placement which brings to light the relatedness of the organization's components as well the student's own potential contributions can produce professionals needed by contemporary human service organizations (Austin & Hopkins, 2004). In addition, one study (Wark, 2005) indicates that in a mid-sized community more than 65% of 73 human service organizations desired employees who had participated in a field experience at the macro level. Finally, Teigiser (2009) argues for broadening the traditional field experience and includes a project in her field placement model with a focus on organizational assessment and intervention. The macro-level field experience, then, is worth considering in the array of approaches for human service education. In the present article, the two-semester macro-level field placement taught by the author is presented with a model for the acquisition of macro level knowledge and experience. It also addresses students' satisfaction with the experience across three years.

It has been asserted that the satisfaction of students with their field placements can lead to a valuing of learning (Fortune, McCarthy, & Abrahamson, 2001). Educators have been interested in student satisfaction with human service field placements for a number of years. Ratings of satisfaction were used as a way to evaluate the effectiveness of a practicum program (Thibadeau & Christian, 1985). In their study, students rated satisfaction in three main areas: the agency, the field instructor and field learning. Thirty-eight students reported satisfaction with their internship training, supervision, and the experience gained at levels all above 90%. In a second study (Kissman & Tran, 1990), five factors were important to the overall satisfaction with the

field placement: goal attainment, adequacy of case assignments, performance feedback, work autonomy and the applicability of the field experience to future work. Their findings also highlighted the importance of satisfaction as a condition for engagement in learning during the field experience. Finally, Wilson, Walsh and Kirby (2008) measured the satisfaction of graduate students with their field placements in the areas of supervision and support from the site supervisor, the frequency and length of the supervision session, and the use of learning tools in supervision. Over 70% of their students reported satisfaction, and the findings pointed to broad distinctions between those satisfied and those not satisfied. In the present article, the satisfaction of students was addressed in two ways: by encouraging the input of students in placement decisions and by formalizing student feedback on their experience in a questionnaire that was used to make changes across four years.

There are three common practice approaches used to assign students to field placement sites wherein either students, sites or faculty have the final decision on placement (Holtzman & Raskin, 1989). All three approaches have their advantages and disadvantages. Students' influence on the decision has become increasingly common (Harris & Maloney, 1999). However, when the decisions are left entirely to students, the site doesn't have an opportunity to provide their perspective of fit. In addition, the students may be unwilling to later take responsibility for their choices. If the field placement site controls the decision, then the emphasis may not be so much on fit as it is on productivity for the organization or on a personality match with the supervisor rather than the student's learning needs (Holtzman & Raskins, 1989). Finally, university programs can assert the final say. This approach is helpful in protecting students, but it lacks the input of students who may feel cheated in this one-time-only experience at a site that does not compel their interest. When developing the placement protocol for this study, the author drew on all three practices with students indicating preferences, sites having the right to accept or reject a student after an interview, and the program being able to provide input and assistance if there was controversy or a need for a second interview.

In the author's field placement, parameters for enrolling in this field experience included the following. First, students were required to complete the two-semester lower level field experience which focused solely on work with clients. Second, students could only be placed at a site differing from both the lower level field placement and any current or past employment. Third, students had to attend a weekly seminars on campus that corresponded to the field placement. Finally, students and sites were expected to participate in traditional monitoring using site visits with additional phone and email contacts throughout the academic year.

Students face novel experiences in any field experience. In addition to acquiring new skills, they must interact with people who do not please them (Sweitzer & King, 2004). They may be in situations where they have to figure out how to fit in. Their deficits are apparent to others, and they are required to accept criticism (May & Kilpatrick, 1989). Students in our program had an additional challenge because they were accustomed to field placements focused on clients whereas this field experience was focused on how social service organizations function. A number of students who were ready to enroll in the upper-level field placement pre-judged it negatively. Some students asserted that because of their career goals to work with clients, this field experience would not be worthwhile. Others believed that they would not be interested in anything that this particular experience had to offer. Still others were worried that they would simply be doing a lot of office work. In addition, this particular field experience was new and

untested, and the author was concerned that the course could fail. The author was also concerned whether or not students would receive an adequate amount of supervision as it could be more time-intensive than the traditional internship. Finally, this field placement could be viewed by some organizations as an opportunity to get work done around the office rather than as an opportunity for professional development of students. Thus, in addition to student satisfaction, it was important to examine the field placement to ensure benefit for the students. A formal presentation of research is beyond the scope of this article, and generalization of any findings should not be assumed.

## **Description of the Field Placement**

Students were placed in a wide range of agencies with populations such as children or adults with disabilities, adults dealing with addictions, victims of domestic violence, women in need of services, families in poverty, foster families, children and adolescents who received mentoring, cancer patients, abused children, grieving children, and elders. The types of activities assigned to students are supported by the existing literature and are described next.

When students first began their placements, they were required to conduct interviews of staff and board members (Kiser, 2008) using 53 questions in the categories of mission, clients, staff, volunteers, governing board, policies and procedures, goals and planning, diversity, finances, technology, relations with the community, marketing, evaluation of the organization and self-in-the-organization (Wark, 2003). Through these interviews, as well as by reading the organization's literature and documents, students acquired knowledge of the mission, structure, and activities of the organization (Alle-Corliss & Alle-Corliss, 2006).

In the fall semester of the two-semester field placement, students started projects guided by the sites' needs. Although the students were typically involved in several projects, an evaluation of some aspect of the organization was required for one of these projects. For example, students conducted surveys of volunteers, former employees and clients with the goal of program improvement. Sites also benefited from evaluations of the satisfaction of their employees. Needs assessment and program effectiveness projects rounded out the possibilities for the evaluation requirement. The author strove to enhance the possibility that students would have enough structure to complete this project and provided detailed project choices for both students and the site supervisors (Kiser, 2008) with the possibility of others being considered. There were a number of other possible projects in which students might be involved across the two semester experience including marketing, fundraising, the development of manuals or other literature, background research for grants, contributions to grant proposals, data collection for external reviews or other reports and setting up a new program. Adjunct activities that expose the intern to other facets of the organization and its mission were also included in the experience. For example, interns attended one or more staff meetings, attended board meetings (Kiser, 2008), and participated in functions of the organization that connect it to the broader community such as an awards dinner or fundraising event.

## **Feedback from Students**

Feedback from students was collected annually across the three years of this pilot study. A questionnaire was used to measure satisfaction with the experience and to monitor the novel field placement under development. Ten items using a rating scale and four open-ended questions were on the questionnaire in addition to reports of work completed at the sites (see Appendix A).

The items on the questionnaire were based on students' projected concerns in the inaugural year of the internship, not on the literature or previous studies.

The full total of 28 students across four years completed the questionnaire. The number of students per year was small because the program was new. For the ten scaled items, the average rating of the four years of results ranged from 3.75 to 4.36 on a one to five scale (See Appendix B). Simple averages and percentages were used. Scores of four and five were considered positive, and scores of one and two were considered negative. A range of scores from one to five were used by students. However, with few exceptions most of the scores of one and two were provided by one student. All 28 students responded to questions one through eight. Twenty three students in the second through fourth years responded to questions nine and ten which were added in the second year of data collection.

Four questions are highlighted here which are related to the author's concerns noted at the beginning of this article. In a global rating of the perceived value of the field placement, 70% of the students across four years indicated an affirmative response to question nine, "I believe my experience at the site was worthwhile." In addition, for question seven, 72% believed that the site complied with the university program's expectations for the internship. That the site provided appropriate tasks and work for them was indicated by 63% affirmative responses. In response to question one, 77% of the students perceived their site supervisor as available when needed.

Students were also asked to respond to four open-ended items related to learning perceived as worthwhile for one's career, experiences that were exceptionally good, experiences that were too challenging and sites worth recommending to other students (see Appendix A). The responses were analyzed using content analysis to identify trends in responses (Krippendorff, 1980). Descriptive categories (Patton, 1980) were the end-point of the analysis as inter-relationships among the responses was unnecessary for the purpose of the questionnaire. For these responses, lists were compiled with some responses showing up in more than one of the years of data collection. To the first question "What did you learn or experience that was worthwhile to your professional development, career and/or education?" responses included:

- Observing nonprofit functioning up close;
- Grant writing; fundraising;
- Exposure to what I want in a future work position;
- Learning specific skills (such as how to develop teamwork);
- Working with volunteers;
- Program evaluation;
- Using technology;
- Using the library for grant research;
- Digging for needed information);
- Everything; networking;
- How not to run an agency;
- How to become a professional

When students were asked to "Describe those parts of your experience that were exceptionally good," they responded:

- Variety;
- Great staff to work with;
- Exceptionally friendly and accepting staff;
- Everyone cooperates with each other;
- A light-hearted atmosphere;
- Networking;
- Grant-writing;
- Advocacy trip to the state capitol;
- Getting artwork from jail inmates for a fundraiser;
- Collecting donations after cold calls;
- Fundraisers;
- Everything;
- Being valued;
- Being complimented often;
- Accepting my input;
- Welcomed by board members;
- Trusted with challenging projects;
- Learning about grants;
- Creativity of the organization;
- Observing a smoothly running organization;
- The projects.

When asked to describe those parts of the field experience that were too challenging or negative, student responses were:

- Needed more work to do;
- Executive director was intimidated by the internship;
- Interaction with supervisor;
- Staff don't have time to use me in a productive way;
- I don't like administrative work;
- Supervisor attitude;
- Lack of vision for my evaluation project.

When asked in the fourth question, "Would you recommend this site to other students for their field placement?" Twenty-four students said, "yes" and four responded, "no."

Finally, students were asked to report on completed work, asking the question, "Did your site say that they would implement any of your ideas or projects completed there?" Nineteen out of twenty-eight students reported knowledge that the placement site would be implementing their ideas and products. Examples included:

- Student-initiated evaluation projects;
- Lesson plans for direct care staff;
- Volunteer orientation handbook;
- Press releases;
- Programs;
- Flyers;
- Board policy statements;

- Evaluation results;
- Research for a grant;
- Database;
- Marketing leads developed by the student;
- Email lists;
- Surveys as well as those with results

## **Implications for Internships and Research**

The macro-level field experience began as an untested course in the author's university program. Thus, it was important to gain students' perspectives and understand what comprised a satisfactory experience. Across time, the feedback was valuable for taking corrective action to ensure that the students had a worthwhile experience with site supervisors and had appropriate tasks at the sites to complete the requirements of the internship. For example, the author requested more structure from the sites so that the students had enough relevant work to do. In addition, more frequent monitoring was implemented to catch problems earlier. Also, based on the responses, two sites were eliminated from the pool of sites during the four years of this examination. In making inferences from the student feedback, it is important to consider that each student did not have exposure to every type of task or activity at their particular site. However, no students indicated dissatisfaction with not having a particular activity available to him/her.

Broad conclusions from all of the questions seemed to indicate that keys to a satisfactory experience include the relationship between the intern and the supervisor and having enough appropriate work to do. Future research could focus on the nature of the supervisor-intern relationship by identifying specifically what the supervisor does that is important to the intern as well as when and what types of guidance should be given. In addition, the specific types of work that seem worthwhile to the intern could be investigated. Another area for further study is a closer examination of those activities at the field placement sites that were perceived as worthwhile to the intern. In addition, the influence of the on-campus seminar on the experience should be researched. Finally, the perspectives of field placement supervisors should be included in understanding the management of this type of field experience.

The author concludes that the initial success of this field experience was based on the ability of most of the sites to provide the required hands-on experiences found worthwhile by the students and the positive treatment of students. These two characteristics could be more important whether the students have direct contact with clients or are involved in macro-level activities. It is hoped this article will stimulate consideration of the macro-level field experience other human service programs.

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## Appendix A: Questionnaire

Please respond to the following items using the scale below:

1 = Not good at all; 2 = Disappointing; 3 = No Opinion; 4 = Good; 5 = Very, very good

- \_\_\_\_\_ 1. The site supervisor was available when I needed him/her.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 2. The staff treated me with respect.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 3. The site and supervisor provided appropriate tasks and work for me to do.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 4. It was reasonably easy to schedule appointments for the required interviews of staff.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 5. My work conditions were adequate (reasonably comfortable, attractive, enough space, etc.)
- \_\_\_\_\_ 6. The staff was cooperative during my interviews.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 7. As far as I could tell, the site did everything in compliance with IPFW expectations.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 8. I felt that I was integrated as well as I might expect into the staff of my site.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 9. I believe that my experience at the site was worthwhile.
- \_\_\_\_\_ 10. My supervisor should be considered for the Outstanding Site Supervisor Award that is given by the Department of Human Services each year.

- 1. Considering both the internship class and the experience at the internship site, what did you learn or experience that was worthwhile to your professional development, career and/or education?
- 2. Describe those parts of your experience that were exceptionally good.
- 3. Describe those parts of your experience that were too challenging or negative.
- 4. Would you recommend this site to other students for their internship and why?

**Appendix B:  
Average Ratings, Range of Scores, and Percentage of Positive Scores**

1. The site supervisor was available when I needed him/her.  
Average rating: 4.14            Range: 1 – 5            % of 4 & 5: 77%
2. The staff treated me with respect.  
Average rating: 4.36            Range: 2 – 5            % of 4 & 5: 90%
3. The site and supervisor provided appropriate tasks and work for me to do.  
Average rating: 3.75            Range: 1 – 5            % of 4 & 5: 63 %
4. It was reasonably easy to schedule appointments for the required interviews of staff.  
Average rating: 4.07            Range: 1 – 5            % of 4 & 5: 72 %
5. Work conditions were adequate: reasonably comfortable, attractive, enough space, etc.  
Average rating: 4.11            Range: 1 – 5            % of 4 & 5: 71 %
6. The staff was cooperative during my interviews.  
Average rating: 4.32            Range: 1 – 5            % of 4 & 5: 81 %
7. As far as I could tell, the site did everything in compliance with (my program's) expectations.  
Average rating: 4.18            Range: 1 – 5            % of 4 & 5: 72 %
8. I felt that I was integrated as well as I might expect into the staff of my site.  
Average rating: 3.77            Range: 1 – 5            % of 4 & 5: 59 %
9. I believe that my experience at the site was worthwhile.  
Average rating: 4.04            Range: 1 – 5            % of 4 & 5: 70 %
10. Consider my supervisor for the Outstanding Site Supervisor Award.  
Average rating: 3.82            Range: 1 – 5            % of 4 & 5: 65 %

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