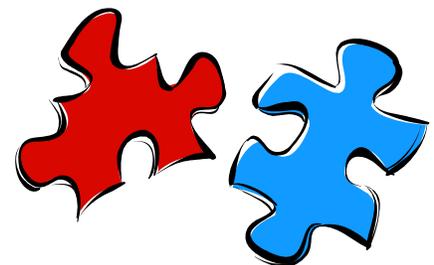
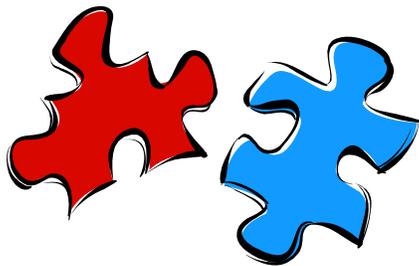


## *Puzzled About Placement?*

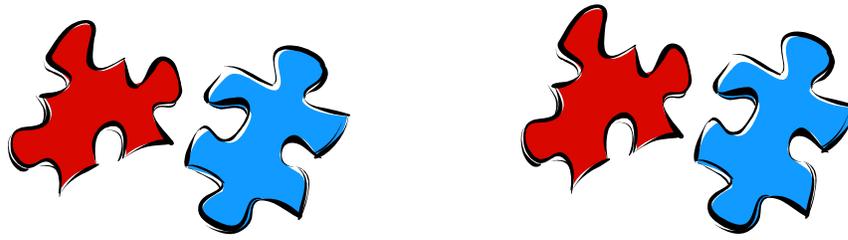
### **A Student Handbook for Field Placement Preparation**

**McMaster University  
School of Social Work**

**Prepared By:  
Students, Faculty**



2013-14



## PUZZLED ABOUT PLACEMENTS?

***“Nothing will prepare you more for the "real world" than placement. You can read all the theories, text books and listen to your professors for hours, but it will never compare to the learning experience you will have at placement. It is probably your most important experience throughout your social work education”.*** (comment from a McMaster Social Work Student, 2009)

***“It is important to think about what you really want to gain/achieve from field placement - placement shouldn't be a hope to lead to a job prospect. Choosing a placement that may benefit you in three years could disadvantage the learning process”.*** (comment from a McMaster Social Work Student, 1997)

**Field Education vs. Field Work.** Your placements are an important part of your social work education. Some students say that placement is where they learned the most. SW 3DD6 and 4DD6 are social work courses for which you are given academic credit. Therefore, your placement is a learning experience and not a work experience. You have a say in what you learn and how you learn it. You can expect instruction not just supervision. Yes you will work, but the work is related to your educational objectives and involves learning about yourself as a social worker.

***“Be prepared to be frustrated at times. It is a challenging and rewarding experience. Ask questions if you don't know. You are not expected to know everything”.*** (comment from a McMaster Social Work Student, 2009)

**Generalist Practice.** To practice social work at the BSW level you need a range of skills. You graduate from McMaster School of Social Work as a generalist not a specialist. You will have the knowledge and skills to function in most social work settings. When choosing a placement, think about what you need to learn and what you want to learn. Focussing on what you need to learn gets you out of the trap of limiting your placement to one population, one modality or one setting. Developing your knowledge through a variety of experiences leaves you better prepared for employment.

***“Think outside the box and color outside of the lines”.*** (comment from the McMaster School of Social Work Student Association, MUSSWSA, 2009)



## FINDING YOUR BEARINGS

### THE PRE-PLACEMENT INTERVIEW

**Why do we have pre placement interviews?** We believe that it is important for students and field instructors to assess if and how they will work together. The interview is an opportunity for you and the potential field instructor to get to know one another, discuss learning objectives and opportunities, and discuss how instruction will occur and to evaluate whether you can learn together. You may decide that this placement is not right for you now or the field instructor may decide that the placement is better suited to another student. The process is meant to be an exchange of information with the goal of the best possible match for student, instructor and agency. An additional benefit is that you get an opportunity to learn about more than one setting and instructional style.

#### **What will the interview be like?**

It is difficult to predict how the interview will be structured. Some agencies have group interviews, others individual ones. The decision to hold a group interview may depend on the number and types of placements offered at the agency and the number of students interested in the setting.



**Group Interviews:** Some agencies organize group interviews where all the students who are interested in the placement meet with all potential field instructors. This preliminary step allows the instructors to explain the agency and their instruction styles to all interested students and gives the students a chance to hear each other's questions. Students are often asked to identify why they are interested in this placement.

***“Take advantage of every opportunity that comes your way, especially if it challenges you. Be open to new experiences and ways of practicing. Learn from all of the workers and clients you come in contact with”.***  
*(comment from a McMaster Social Work Student, 2009)*



**Individual Interviews:** Some interviews are structured in a more formal fashion to help you and the field instructor share information in a systematic way. Others are quite informal and feel more like a “chat.” Sometimes the style of an interview may tell you about the culture of the agency.

*Pre-  
placement  
interview*

## REPARING FOR THE PRE-PLACEMENT INTERVIEW



### Investigating

The more you know, the more it shows!

***Go into your interviews with questions you want answered. Choose your placement. Don't let your placement choose you!*** (comment from a McMaster Social Work Student, 1997)

How can you find out about a setting before your interview?

- previous student evaluations of the setting located in the School of Social Work Office
- binders containing “Placement Availability Forms” in School of Social Work office.
- other students !!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!!
- your professor, other professors, your T.A.s
- if you call the agency and ask for general information they may send out a brochure or package
- your field instructor from last year, if you are in fourth year
- local directories of community services - in Hamilton-Wentworth the directory is published by Community Information Services (528-0104). The directories are available in Social Work Office, or the library. Hamilton' s directory is known as “the red book”; Toronto-blue; Halton-blue; Brantford-green. Please note date of publication. However, programs and personnel change frequently so there may be outdated information in community directories.
- Agency web sites

## Self-Assessment

Take a moment and think about what YOU will bring to placement.

- Identify some personal characteristics that will contribute to your success as a social worker.
- Identify some personal characteristics that may result in challenges to you in your role as a social worker.
- Given your values and life experiences, are there any areas of social work, problem types or clients with whom you will have difficulty working?
- Consider your location in society. What personal challenges will you face in working with people who are a different race, gender, sexual orientation, ability, ethnicity or age. How will these challenges affect your learning in placement?
- Define your communication skills: how well do you write? How clearly do you communicate in groups? One on one?
- Explore your organizational skills. What will be helpful to your role as a student social worker? What will need improvement?
- Do you appreciate a structured experience? Or, do you like flexibility?

***Collins (1992) et al state that "A fit between your values and those of your practicum setting is vital" (77). This is true to some extent, but in reality there is no perfect fit. It is important to increase our self-awareness about our values. We can learn from the differences in values we may hold from the field instructor . . . We are not always going to agree with all the values of clients either . . . We often think of values referring to the "big" things, such as honesty, the importance of human life, etc. However, some of the little things can rear their head unexpectedly, especially if we are not aware of our values. For example, if we value cleanliness, it may be difficult for us to work with a person who is unkempt and/ or has body odour. (comment from a McMaster Social Work Student, 1997)***

## Learning Objectives

***“Try to list some goals or knowledge you want to get out of your placement. When interviewing for the placement do not be afraid to ask how you can obtain information, knowledge etc.”*** (comment from a McMaster social work student, 1997)

Learning objectives for the practicum are statements of what you wish to achieve by the end of the course. They are defined in behavioural terms (so that you have a sense of direction and accomplishment) and describe outcomes. Your learning objectives can guide your choice of placement and are a starting point for contracting with your field instructor.

---

### Categories of Learning Objectives

**Conceptual** = relates to ideas, theory, knowledge, socio-political analysis, policy, research issues.

**Skills** = relates to specific social work skills including assessment, interviewing, advocacy.

**Personal/ Professional** = relates to issues of self-awareness, work habits, values.

---

### How do I define my learning objectives?

- Consider your experience and your hopes. What do you want to learn?
- Review course objectives
- Review the Student Evaluation Forms for SW3DD6 and SW4DD6
- Reflect on your Social Work and related courses. What do you want to build on or test in practice? What do you need to work on and develop? What are your academic strengths? Weaknesses?
- Consider what this potential placement can offer you.

The learning objectives are used to negotiate a “contract” with your field instructor and the agency regarding what you will learn, how you will learn and how you will be evaluated.



***“Know what you want to learn. Talk to people - lots of people - once you know what you want - make sure you get it - ask, then persist, ensure it happens”.*** (comment from a McMaster Social Work Student, 1997)

***“Sometimes you might think that you can't do something, but if you challenge yourself you can! You will learn a lot about social work, but also about yourself. Voice your opinions, and initiate new opportunities for learning”.*** (comment from a McMaster Social Work Student, 2009)

***“Be patient with the interviewing process and do not panic; everything falls into place in due time. Go to as many interviews as is feasible for you - you may be surprised where your interests lay!”*** (comment from a McMaster Social Work Student, 1997)

## **Things To Bring To Your Interview**

Field Instructors will vary in what they ask you for. It's best to come prepared. Bring the following to your pre-placement interview:

1. Resume.
2. Your last field placement evaluation. (This applies to students who have completed a placement)
3. Preliminary learning objectives. You will revise these when you begin your placement.
4. Course outline.
5. Questions you want to ask.

***“Make sure (your) schedule is workable”.*** (comment from a McMaster Social Work Student, 1997)

***“Follow your gut, stand up for yourself. Take the time to find the best placement”.*** (comment from a McMaster Social Work Student, 1997)



# THE INTERVIEW

## Questions for the field instructor:

- ✓ What have previous social work students accomplished in this organization?
- ✓ Who are the primary service users?
- ✓ Can you tell me about your experience as a social worker and field instructor?
- ✓ What will you do if you have a concern about me?
- ✓ Do you give constructive criticism?
- ✓ Will you tell me if I do something well?
- ✓ How do you conduct field instruction meetings? Who sets the agenda for these meetings?
- ✓ Will I have an opportunity to observe you working? Will I have a chance to observe others working?
- ✓ When will I begin independent work? E.g. When will I have my own case? Task? Group?
- ✓ Will I receive any instruction either individually or in a group from other staff? If so, how will their observations of me be incorporated into my feedback or my evaluation?
- ✓ Is there anything I need to prepare for our field instruction meetings? Eg. Case notes, process recording, assessments, and summary of articles?
- ✓ I know that there are a lot of changes and pressures on health and social service organizations these days, how are the pressures affecting this organization and its staff and clients?

***“Social work is challenging, it is a continuous learning process. Believe in yourself and your ability to create change”.*** (comment from McMaster Social Work Student, 2009)





## Practical Things To Find Out About

- ✓ Do you have a sexual harassment policy? an anti-discrimination policy? a policy on worker safety?
- ✓ Do I need a car? Is mileage reimbursed? Do I have to pay for parking?
- ✓ What are the learning resources available to me: library, computers, books, videos, simulated patients etc.?
- ✓ What are your routines for lunch and breaks and how would this fit for me?
- ✓ What is the workload: caseload expected of students? Recording? Presenting at team? Staff meetings? Stats? Committee work?
- ✓ Hours of operation? Is there opportunity for evening or weekend work?
- ✓ Is there space for me? i.e. desk, a place to secure my belongings, phone, chair, etc.
- ✓ Is there privacy for interviews, phone calls and groups? If not, how do I work around this?
- ✓ Are students welcome to attend team meetings? Staff meetings?
- ✓ Team meeting times?
- ✓ Is there an opportunity to have flexible hours for placement?
- ✓ Can I negotiate time off if I make up the time?

### Dress

Dress is a very personal thing. Some placement settings have formalized dress codes and others have codes of dress, but they are informally determined. The issue is not so much how you dress, but to be aware that there may be expectations and your dress may affect your interview. In an ideal world this wouldn't be an issue but it can be. If the dress of the organization strikes you as too casual or too formal this may affect your decision on whether it's suitable for you! If you can find out before you go to the interview this may help. If not, you may wish to take a "moderate" approach.

***Ask questions. No question is stupid, you'll lose out if you don't.*** (comment from a McMaster Social Work Student, 1997)



# IMPORTANT

???

Questions you might be asked:

???

- ✓ What are you interested in doing in a placement?
- ✓ Tell me about your volunteer and employment experience.
- ✓ What types of clients do you prefer/dislike to work with?
- ✓ Where would you like to be five years from now?
- ✓ What courses do you like the best? The least?
- ✓ What is your BA or BSc?
- ✓ What are your strengths and weaknesses?
- ✓ What will you do when there is conflict?
- ✓ What do you expect from a field instructor?
- ✓ Do you work better with structure? Flexibility?
- ✓ Can you work evenings? Is your schedule flexible?

***“You may go into the interview with your learning goals/contract prepared. Although you and your prospective field instructor may “connect,” it is important that he or she has the same vision as you do for your learning needs. If not, a personality match is not enough to base your placement decision on”. (comment from a McMaster social work student, 1997)***

***“Self care is important. Placement is a good experience to put what you are learning into practice”. (comment from a McMaster Social Work Student, 2009)***

## Why Have You Chosen This Potential Placement?

You will likely be asked this question. If you aren't asked this question, you may want to share this information. Ask yourself this question before you attend a pre-placement interview. Each student will have different reasons, i.e.: the reputation of the Field Instructor, agency mandate, model of service provision, the client population, the placement is close to home, etc. Your answer will have an impact on the field instructor. If you have given it some thought before you go, it may help to clarify in your own mind why you are going and lead to clarifying your expectations. The answer will also help the field instructor to understand you better.

## CHOOSING A PLACEMENT

### What do I consider?

***“Make sure that there is a good match between you and your supervisor. Usually you will be able to tell in the interview, but don’t be afraid to get out if the match is poor. Don’t enter into a placement based entirely on the experience. You will get the experience in due time, but placement supervisors are part of your experience as well”.*** (comment from a McMaster social work student, 1997)

It is important to consider the field instructor’s traits and qualities along with his or her organizational context before you make a decision about a placement.

- Personal Characteristics: Field Instructors have unique supervision styles, personality traits, professional strengths and weaknesses. Try to gain an understanding of these characteristics and how they fit with yours.
- Training and experience: BA? BSW? MSW? No Degree? Field Instructors also vary in the amount of experience they have as supervisors. You could be her first student or her tenth. If she has no social work degree, who will be a social work mentor to you? What do you want in a field instructor? Field Instructors may have a broad base of knowledge (but not necessarily deep) or specialized (but not necessarily broad).
- Ablism? Racism? Sexism? Heterosexism? Ageism? Etc. . . . How does she address injustice in her work? Do her values fit with yours?
- Organizational Context: The field instructor is part of the organization. The organization influences the worker’s ability to provide instruction. Does his organization support him in his work as a field instructor? Does the organization welcome students?
- Position: It is a strength that social workers have employment in a wide range of positions. Some include supervision, management, policy analysis, research, community development, crisis intervention, therapy, and case management. Your field instructor’s position in the organization will influence her supervision.
- Teaching Style: Field Instructors have different teaching styles. Some field instructors teach by example, others provide direction; still others expect students to seek out learning opportunities. How do you like to learn and how does this style fit with that of the instructor? If it is different, how open is he/she to discussing the differences?
- Instrumental: Does she have time for you?



**Remember:** It is not important to always find the perfect match. Sometimes working with someone who has strengths where you have weaknesses is more important than working with someone who is just like you. Try to keep an open mind, and to be flexible. ***The perfect placement and field instructor is probably not out there.*** Assess what is important to you in terms of learning and try to keep the lines of communication open.

### **Prepare Yourself for Worry About Competition or Disappointments.**

Sometimes your first and second choices of placements are not available. Sometimes a setting will choose another student for the placement or will say that they are unable to offer you the placement. Sometimes there are changes in an agency that prevents them from offering a placement. This is really upsetting. Please remember that the pre-placement interviews are attempting to find the best match of student learning needs and style with setting learning opportunities and teaching style. Even when a match does not emerge from an interview, students report that they learn about the agency, themselves and the interviewing process. Senior students and graduates of the program often say that the pre-placement interviews prepared them for job interviews.

### **Choice**

Our placements are limited by those offered to the school by placement agencies. The number of placements depends on many things including the economic and social context of social services. The school (and the Canadian Association for Schools of Social Work) places certain restrictions on the field placements i.e. that the instructors should have a BSW, MSW, or MA (SWP) and that the settings are compatible with social work values. Where the field instructor does not hold a social work degree, we try to arrange for a “mentor” who will help you link your learning to social work theory and values. Your “dream” placement may not be available. However, consider what your learning needs are and assess what other placements might meet those needs.

### **Power**

As with all relationships, power is a central organizing factor in the field placement relationship. It is important for you to assess whether this is acknowledged either formally or informally. Despite the power differential, can you be free to voice your opinion?

Of course the field instructor has “power over you.” She has control over your work to some extent, and she has an influence on whether or not you pass your placement. Remember you have power too. You are not an employee and as a student have some freedom to challenge and learn. Usually the field instructor gets feedback from the student to assess her success as a field instructor. Supervisors care what students think and say about them. Your assessment of the placement is usually very important to the instructor.

## THE MATCHING PROCESS



After the pre-placement interviews:

- consider many of the points mentioned in this handbook
- call your seminar leader and discuss your interview(s) and your assessment of the learning opportunities. Tell your seminar leader if you would accept the placement. If you are a fourth level (SW 4D06/4DD6) student, let your seminar leader know what is your first and second choice.
- the field instructor should also call the seminar leader and discuss a first and second choice of students.
- the seminar leader will facilitate a “match”
- after you have determined what placement you will attend, call the field instructor to determine start dates. You may want to ask if there is any reading you can do to prepare for the placement.
- If you are deciding against a placement, field instructors often appreciate hearing from you. A phone call or a thank you note is a thoughtful idea.

**After you begin placement:**

***It is very easy to get caught up in your case load. While this is important remember that you are a student! Make sure your learning needs are being met and are not suffering because you are so wrapped up in your case load. Don't take on too much work or too many clients. It is important that you feel comfortable with the amount of work you have while still being able to learn.***

***Address difficulties/problems at placement as soon as possible.***

***Remember not to antagonize the office staff.***

***Be assertive about what you want and need to learn.***

***Talk to other professionals to learn more - i.e. Child and Youth Workers.***

***...make sure you have a variety of responsibilities if possible. (i.e.: group work, individual, community resources). Don't feel insulted if your clients never show up. (comments from a McMaster Social Work Student, 1997)***

**Please note that your WSIB form must be completed by you and your placement supervisor and then returned to the School of Social Work prior to beginning your placement.**

**Learning about social work does not stop at the end of your placements. You will continue to learn throughout your life.**

## **ENJOY!**

**This handbook was prepared by a sub committee of the Field Instruction Committee:**

**Nola Bachiu, Field Instructor, Hamilton Health Sciences Corp.  
Sharon Humphreys, Field Placement Assistant,  
Beth Porter, Social Work Student  
Shelley Rempel, Field Instructor, Housing Help Centre  
Sheila Sammon, Faculty Field Co-ordinator**

**With written contributions from:  
Students in SW 3D06 and SW 4D06 concurrent seminars 1996-1997  
The Field Instruction Committee**

**Some ideas in this handbook are adapted from:  
Collins, D. Tomlinson, B. , and Grinnell, R.M. Jr. (1992) The Social Work Practicum:  
A Student Guide. Itasca, Illinois: Peacock**

