

## Field Office Q&A

This topic will be based on students' questions or concerns that are familiar to the Field Office staff. The answers provided are intended as food for thought and should supplement not supersede guidance from your assigned Field Liaison. Your suggestions for additional questions are welcomed (direct suggestions to [pettie@albany.edu](mailto:pettie@albany.edu)). Please be advised, however, that if your suggested question reflects your own current or urgent concern you should not rely on the listserv for an immediate response. Instead, contact your Field Liaison.

### **Q:**

What if I'm not getting enough cases or client contact at my placement?

### **A:**

The answer depends on the reason for lack of client contact. A low client census at the agency for a Field Instructor who is protective of students or clients are just two possibilities. In the event of...

*A low census:* It needn't be all or nothing. If full case assignments are slow to come, consider approaching your supervisor with an interim proposal. Identify part of a case or group that you could assist with and offer to help out on that basis (specific opportunities will vary depending on your placement setting).

*Protective Field Instructor:* A) Open the topic with your Field Instructor for a dialogue and address his/her concerns directly. B) Invite your Field Instructor to shadow you. C) Offer to take parts of an assignment or share a case. Although your involvement may be modest at first, it'll provide an opportunity to demonstrate your abilities. Your level of client contact will likely increase from this point. D) Share potential class assignments with your Field Instructor so that they have a better understanding of what you should be able to do with a client. E) Contact your field Liaison for input if the situation persists.

### **Q:**

What if I can't get the kind of case I need to complete a class assignment?

### **A:**

Try branching out. If the type of client or client contact isn't available in your immediate situation, perhaps you could find it nearby. Your Field Instructor may know of an affiliated department or setting that may have just what you need and be willing to help provided you ask. One student created the kind of contact she needed by proposing to do a follow-up visit with a client who was phasing out or discharged. Some agencies are quite receptive to such proposals especially if they can serve a dual purpose. Of course the nature of the class assignment will direct your search and evaluation of possibilities. Finally, your class instructor may be willing to modify the assignment somewhat to accommodate your existing

access to clients. You may wish to consider a specific modification that preserves the essential integrity of the assignment beforehand and then propose it.

**Q:**

Staff members at my placement sometimes joke about their cases. Isn't this unprofessional?

**A:**

Your concern is understandable. Is it...?

- |                   |                                |
|-------------------|--------------------------------|
| A) Disrespectful  | C) A Breach of Confidentiality |
| B) Unprofessional | D) A Sign of Burnout           |

It could be all of the above and sometimes is. Such cases *do* exist in the workplace. If you haven't yet encountered them, you probably will. Perhaps the best way to answer this question is..."It depends".

*A Closer Look:* Before reaching a verdict consider a couple of alternative angles.

A) In some settings "gallows humor" functions as a method for coping with high levels of stress. Hospital emergency departments, for instance, are often compared to combat zones by the people who work in them (periods of calm punctuated by unpredictable flurries of extreme stress and demand). This experience of being "in the trenches" means repeatedly bearing witness to people as they endure the worst events of their lives. The staff members share a common commitment that is seldom questioned. Under such circumstances, humor might be perceived as an important outlet and adaptive form of coping. ("This work will make you either laugh or cry.") However, conduct that is blatantly unprofessional should never be excused as stress management. Such instances might include joking about cases in the presence of clients, family members or agency personnel unrelated to the case.

B) One tool that might assist with a "differential diagnosis" here is your own observation. How do staff members behave when working directly with clients? Are clients treated with respect? Does behavior toward clients reinforce or contradict your initial impressions? Is there a norm for this workplace? Does it reflect high or low levels of morale?

*Finally:* Such confrontations play an essential role in the task of developing one's own professional identity.

- ❖ To what extent do our personality, temperament, values and role models become factors in how we interpret/respond to such encounters?

- ❖ How do we reconcile our needs to both affiliate and differentiate within a work group?
- ❖ What methods can we use to help ourselves cope with stress on site?

Talk it over. Check out your hunches with your Field Instructor, Field Liaison or fellow students.

**Q:**

Process Recordings seem like a burden to both my supervisor and me. Any advice?

**A:**

Weekly Process Recordings remain a firm requirement. However, it sounds like it's time to reduce costs and increase benefits. The following tips are aimed at accomplishing this.

*Streamline Process/Product:* Perfectionist standards can create extra work.

- A) Instead of slaving three hours over refining a single Process Recording, strive for one PR = one hour of time invested.
- B) If your handwriting is perfectly legible you have the option of not typing it.
- C) Using the template provided during orientation is also an option.

*Plan B:* A thorough and accurate transcription of an entire client session should always be your plan. However, under some circumstances plan B may occasionally need to be employed.

- ❖ For Example: at a school program for young children there was initially little opportunity for full-length sessions with students. Instead the intern assembled recordings from a series of brief encounters that showed continuity and evolution.
- ❖ Occasionally, time constraints at an agency may force you to shorten your Process Recording. Select two sections that are strengths and two difficulties for input.

*Alternative Methods:* Process Recordings can involve a trade off. While less intrusive than other methods, they can be more time consuming. Why not explore all options? Some settings may already use audio or video tape recordings for supervision/training and have a built in format for it.

*Process Recording Used for Problem-Solving:*

A) *Demonstrate Skills*: If your Field Instructor has been slow to assign cases it may be because they are feeling protective of you or the clients. Process Recordings may demonstrate a skill level that enhances the Field Instructor's confidence in your readiness.

B) *Convert your Field Instructor into an Ally*: Process Recordings are sometimes used by faculty as the basis for an assignment. For instance you might be required to identify a number of interventions with a Process Recording. Why not ask your Field Instructor to team up with you on this assignment and assist you? This shift in perspective from critic to ally can help expand your roles beyond that of sender/receiver of feedback.

*Enforced Empathy*: As a student learner you may feel an acute sense of vulnerability and exposure. It may help to know that your Field Instructor (when enrolled in supervisor training) was required to submit to the school a Process Recording from a supervisory meeting with their student. Having been in the same boat may provide an opportunity to share with one another what that's like and what's at stake. Keep in mind that your Field Instructor might also experience some level of risk and exposure. Their comments on your work reveal a level of expertise. Ideally, this can become "grist for the mill" in supervision. However, sometimes mutual resistance can create a *Contract to Avoid* whereby an unspoken agreement is reached, "I won't talk about it if you don't".

**Q:**

My fieldwork has led to a reevaluation of Social Work as my career choice. What does this mean?

**A:**

This could mean many things but you're definitely not alone. Whether entering the field as an intern or recent graduate, we may become troubled when we encounter things we hadn't anticipated. Here's a brief sample of possible encounters.

- ❖ I'm only able to give help that seems limited and incomplete.
- ❖ The system is sometimes fragmented and incomplete.
- ❖ Injustices abound.
- ❖ I take the lives and troubles of my clients home with me and can't seem to turn it off.

- ❖ Sometimes it seems I'm surrounded by staff who are cynical and burned out. They don't seem to try as hard or care as much as I do.

Whether you find such encounters intriguing, annoying, disturbing or downright repellent will depend on a host of factors including your temperament and personal values. It's impossible to tackle the origins and implications of each example here. However, it may be helpful to examine a phenomenon that many professional social workers will recognize. As newcomers entering the field our expectations and pre-conceptualizations of the profession are often put on a collision course with its realities and imperfections. The resulting impact can trigger an internal crisis of which there are numerous variations. Here are two:

A) *Single Event*: All elements culminate within one particular instance. The crisis is acute.

B) *Protracted*: Smaller episodes create a progression that is incremental. A low-grade crisis of dissatisfaction is perpetuated.

*Common Characteristics*: The experience may include a sense of disillusionment or betrayal, wounded ideals, feelings of loss and grief.

*Resolution*: If resolved in favor of continuing in the profession, the crisis becomes a significant milestone in the evolution of one's professional identity (loss of innocence being a presumed initiation). Such events serve as a definite wake up call/reality check. Some input from a trusted friend might assist in your interpretation of the experience. And don't rule out your Field Instructor as a sounding board. She/he may find your honesty and self-awareness both impressive and refreshing. They may also be encouraged to tell a story (stories) of their own. Keep in mind also that while some may be reluctant to admit it, many seasoned professionals periodically ask themselves the same thing you are.

*Questions for Consideration*:

- ❖ How can I tell the difference between the burned out cynic and the seasoned veteran who has learned how to work and take care of her/himself?
- ❖ How do I accept limitations without feeling defeated?
- ❖ Are my feelings of helplessness associated with particular expectations?
- ❖ Must I relinquish my ideals as I become socialized into the profession?
- ❖ Which personal values are non-negotiable?
- ❖ Is there a relationship between naiveté and idealism?
- ❖ If a certain amount of ongoing ambivalence toward the profession is expected, how do I manage this ambivalence?

**Q:** What's a macro project and how do I plan one?

**A:** The macro project for field is part of the generalist field experience and applies to first year students only. It is intended to provide you an experience with initiating change at a larger systems level. Ideally it should take place in the agency or community beyond the level of working with individuals or small groups. You can propose your own idea to your field instructor but the project should have practical benefit to the agency. If you know what you are going to do early on you include it in your learning agreement. The project constitutes a field assignment independent of any similar project that might be assigned in another class at school and they should not be substituted for one another. Once completed, the product or project description should be attached to the next field evaluation submitted to the field office when that evaluation is due. Conducting your project needn't take the whole internship but it could depending on the scope. The important thing to keep in mind is not to procrastinate and have it haunt you down the home stretch.

**Q:** How can I be doing so well in class but struggling so much in my internship?

**A:** Big topic. There are several ways to address this question but one thing we've noticed is that these two performance arenas draw on different skill sets. Check out the two lists below.

### **Different Demands for Thriving and Surviving**

#### **Academic success**

Time Management  
Note taking  
Writing Ability  
Establishing and Maintaining Boundaries  
Critical Thinking  
Analysis  
Organization  
Study Skills  
Reading comprehension

#### **Internship Success**

Spontaneity  
Adaptability  
Acceptance of learner role  
Estab. & Maint. boundaries  
Confidence  
Self Soothing

These lists aren't exhaustive nor mutually exclusive. Effective functioning barrowed from one place, such as time management, can be transferable to the other. But there are distinctions worth noting. (Beware of reduction and exaggeration for emphasis.)

The academic arena relies heavily on our "executive faculty"...our intellect. If graduate school entails a continuation of the student role for you then your executive muscles may be well exercised by now. In addition, requirements for success in class are usually spelled out in a syllabus and expectations are clearly defined. Let's face it, successful behaviors are established more quickly when results and feedback are direct and rewards are clear. So one reason you might be doing better in class is that the rules of the game are clearer and you've been at it longer. There's also more consistency between teachers and classes than between agencies and clients.

In field however, conditions are more ambiguous and place heavy demands on a skill set characterized by integration that can be difficult to acquire without “trial by fire.” A tournament racquetball player once described his plan for defeating an opponent after scouting them out. “First I’ll do this, then this, then that.” But then he admitted, “Once you step onto that court and the ball starts flying you’re now in the “blender”. He must figure it out as he goes along and ad lib.

This difference in demand can result in a 20 something student feeling whip lashed passing from school to field. Meanwhile a 40 something student can feel whip lashed going from work back to school. Both feel ambushed by a steep learning curve they didn’t expect and aren’t sure how to interpret. The highflying academic achiever with a 4.0 may fall harder in field if their performance there doesn’t coincide their achievement identity. For a perfectionist every encounter in field brings with it the opportunity to prove either “I do or don’t belong doing this”. The stakes can become quite high.

One prime task for students is managing the tension between two competing aspects within the role of intern. How does one balance the desire to prove competence with the vulnerability of not knowing? This is why self soothing becomes a critical skill for mastering this task. We won’t go on and on discussing this skill now but it’s worth reflecting on a bit.

## **Additional Considerations**

### **Script Building**

In addition of the skill of self soothing, script building can help us deal with the vulnerability of not knowing. Learners formulate and test acceptable ways of saying “I don’t know” that can minimize feelings of helplessness or incompetence. Many interns pose clarifying questions that buy time until they can organize their thoughts better for a response. Some students follow an “I’m not sure…” with a “...but I’ll find out for you.”

### **Barrow from Yourself**

Identify something you can already do well and build it into your placement duties. One student with a teaching background offered to run a psycho education group at his clinic placement. His performance there fortified him for leading a relapse prevention group which was less familiar to him. Another student struggled with setting limits with mandated clients she found manipulative. Even though being the enforcer didn’t come naturally to her she thought of another time at a camp for kids when she had to get tough and it worked. This gave her confidence to relocate that part of herself and apply it when necessary in her new setting.

### **Make it Your Own**

There's little worse than feeling like an imposter in a costume soon to be discovered. To improve the fit try putting your own twist on a task and see if it works. Starting small will lower the stakes. One student tried out a pie diagram in some of her assessments with clients. It worked so well she began using it routinely and the rest of the team eventually adopted it. Though now a formal tool, it was originally devised to help her take ownership of her role- to feel less self conscious and more authentic.

### **Invite a Story**

This may require taking a chance. How welcoming are you and your field supervisor of admitting/discussing the not knowing and vulnerability that comes with it? Perhaps your supervisor could describe a time when they confronted and dealt with this experience. Many supervisors still haven't forgotten what it was like and honestly won't have to look far to find an example. Telling stories can model interpersonal courage, normalize our experiences and give permission to disclose.

### **Identify What's at Stake**

Reflect on what's at stake for you regarding your performance in field. You can do this not only with your overall performance but with specific instances. Trust permitting, consider sharing some aspect of this with our field instructor. Your field liaison may also provide a safe outlet or sounding board if desired.

### **One Placement is One Agency**

Keep in mind that one placement setting doesn't represent an entire field of social work possibilities. One task in developing a professional identity involves an agency and population sort process. Within each agency an organizational culture is imposed requiring some ratio of mutual adaptation. Ease of adaptation can impact our performance as we consider: Too fast? Too slow? Too big? Too small? Too formal? Too informal? Etc.