

The Merrill Social Work and Human Services Series

4TH EDITION

THE PRACTICUM COMPANION
FOR SOCIAL WORK
Integrating Class and Field Work

JULIE BIRKENMAIER | MARLA BERG-WEGER



FOURTH EDITION

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Preface

The Practicum Companion for Social Work: Integrating Class and Field Work is designed to accompany bachelor-level (BSW) and master-level (MSW) social work practicum students through their initial experiences in the field component of the social work education process. Each chapter covers issues pertinent to the social work field placement. *Practice applications* are woven throughout each chapter to provide an avenue for you to integrate the material into your practica. These practice applications include discussion questions, role-plays, and exercises that will help you to apply the material covered in each chapter to your field experiences. Each chapter ends with a *summary* of the key content.

In addition to providing information on applying social work knowledge and skills in the field through practice, each chapter contains several *case scenarios*. Through the case scenarios, you follow the progression of six fictitious students—Amina, Ben, Cameron, Corina, Lauren, and Rosa—through their practicum experiences. These students will encounter situations that are relevant to the topics presented and that may be similar to situations you or your classmates experience in your own field placements. These fictional stories will help you to apply your knowledge, skills, and values to issues presented in this text and will spur discussion. Some case scenarios end with discussion questions that lead into the topic and are resolved in the postscripts to the scenarios that are presented at the end of each chapter. Both the case scenarios and the practice applications may be used to stimulate critical thinking and discussion in field supervision or the classroom.

It is our sincere hope that this book will differ from the other texts you have read for your social work courses. This text is designed to aid you in your integration of theory with practice, where the “rubber hits the road.”

Connecting Core Competencies Series

The new edition of this text is a part of Pearson Education’s *Connecting Core Competencies Series*, which consists of foundation-level texts that make it easier than ever to ensure your success in learning the nine core competencies, as stated by the

Council on Social Worker Education (CSWE) in its 2015 *Education Policy and Accreditation Standards*. This text contains *core competency icons* throughout that directly link the CSWE core competencies to the content of the text. The *critical thinking questions* are also included to further your mastery of the CSWE standards.

New to This Edition

- All chapters have been updated to reflect the 2015 CSWE Education Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS) competencies and behaviors.
- Additional content has been added on learning plans, including a more detailed example of a plan that will help students create their own learning plans.
- The book has substantial additional cultural competence and humility content related to socialization, the workplace environment, and practice at all levels. A new case, Amina, has been added to highlight potential LGBTQ student issues. Her case is not resolved in each chapter, which provides the fodder for classroom discussion.
- New content includes case management and expanded coverage of ethics within the practicum setting, which helps students navigate systems and display competence.
- Expanded coverage of professional socialization, self-care, and the creation of a professional identity assists students in their early weeks of professional practice.
- Additional content on safety, including new roles and documentation requirements, better prepares students for many types of professional situations.

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J. B.

M. B.-W.

Book Series

Connecting Core Competencies Chapter-by-Chapter Matrix

Chapter	Ethical Behavior	Diversity in Practice	Human Rights & Justice	Research-Based Practice	Policy Practice	Engage	Assess	
1	✓	✓		✓				
2	✓	✓						
3	✓					✓	✓	
4	✓	✓						
5		✓	✓					
6	✓	✓				✓	✓	
7		✓		✓		✓	✓	
8	✓	✓			✓	✓	✓	
9	✓					✓	✓	
10						✓	✓	
Total Chapters	7	7	1	2	1	6	6	

Before You Head into the Field: A Prepracticum Guide

1

Chapter Outline

What Is Practicum?

Ask Yourself

Reasonable Expectations for the Field Experience

Tips for the Practicum Interview

Questions That May Be Asked of You at the Interview

Questions to Consider Asking an Agency Representative

If you have not already received information from your social work program about practicum and prepared for the practicum placement/selection process, the following information will assist you as you make arrangements.

What is Practicum?

Practicum (or field placement) is a social work internship served within an agency or organization affiliated with your social work program that provides a type of social work service. The focus of practicum is gaining supervised social work experience in order to enhance the knowledge and skills gained from your coursework. The processes by which students secure a practicum site vary widely.

Ask Yourself

Questions to ask yourself as you begin the practicum placement/selection process include the following:

1. What client system(s) interest me (social work with individuals and families, groups, organizations, and communities)?
2. What client populations interest me (children, older adults, teen mothers, etc.)?
3. What client issues interest me (homelessness, mental health, child abuse/neglect, troubled adolescents, etc.)?
4. What setting would I prefer (school, community-based health clinic, public child welfare agency, advocacy organization, etc.)?
5. What size agency would I prefer (large, midsized, or small)?
6. What knowledge and skills do I want to gain as a result of this practicum experience?
7. What area or field of social work practice do I see myself involved in after I graduate?
8. What social work knowledge and skills do I need to achieve both my short-term and my long-term professional goals? What practice behaviors do I need to demonstrate in the upcoming practicum?
9. What mentor qualities best assist me in learning? How can I assess for those qualities when interviewing potential field instructors?

Although educational models of the field program vary across social work programs, students in all programs are required to demonstrate behaviors and competencies. There are general expectations of the field experience that stem from the Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards issued in 2015 by the Council for Social Work Education, to which accredited social work programs are required to adhere. These standards include the following:

1. A structure that facilitates the integration of coursework with the experiences in the field. Models include a class taught on campus, periodic face-to-face seminars, online seminars, and agency-based group learning experiences.
2. A structured admission procedure to field education.
3. A planned and structured learning experience with opportunities for students to demonstrate competencies at the appropriate (i.e., BSW or MSW) level.
4. Policies, procedures, expectations, and appropriate support for field instructors and agencies.
5. Policies and procedures for placing and monitoring students, maintaining field liaison contacts with agencies, and evaluating student learning and field setting effectiveness congruent with the program's competencies.

Tips for the Practicum Interview

The extent to which students interview for a practicum position varies among social work programs. If you will interview with an agency representative, your preparation for the interview may include obtaining background information about the agency so that you can engage in a knowledgeable dialogue with the interviewer about the agency and anticipating questions similar to the following and preparing answers to them.

Questions That May Be Asked of You at the Interview

1. Why are you interested in working with this particular population/agency/field supervisor?
2. What courses have you completed that may be relevant to this setting/work?
3. What are your strengths related to social work skills and knowledge? Your areas for growth?
4. What are your strengths related to professional work habits? Your areas for growth?

5. What are your career goals? Goals for this practicum? How could this practicum help you achieve your long-term goals?
6. Under what type of supervision do you learn best?
7. What is the most effective way in which you learn (by watching and modeling others, by listening to others talk about their work, by jumping in and learning from your mistakes, etc.)?
8. What experience/interest/skills do you have that set you apart from other candidates for this practicum slot?
9. What behaviors do you need to learn at your next practicum to master the relevant social work competencies?

An interview often includes time for questions to be asked of an agency representative that will aid you in determining whether a practicum within a particular setting meets your goals.

Questions to Consider Asking an Agency Representative

1. What is the history of the organization?
2. Will I be able to demonstrate the specific behaviors and competencies required by my program at this setting? What has been the range of learning experiences for previous students at this agency?
3. What are some possible tasks/activities with which I will be involved?
4. What style of supervision is used by the field instructor?
5. Does the agency have a formal training procedure/orientation for students?
6. What are the expectations of the field instructor regarding logistics (hours at the practicum, flexibility of hours, availability of the student to clients, dress code, meetings, parking, travel, etc.)?
7. Will other students be working in the agency during my practicum? How many students does one field instructor supervise at one time?
8. Will the person interviewing me become my field instructor? If not, will I have an opportunity to meet with my field instructor before I begin my practicum?
9. Will I have the opportunity to have contact with all aspects of the agency and learn more about the overall functioning of the agency?

10. Will the work entail any health or safety risks? Will I need any health tests or immunizations to work at the agency?
11. Does the work at the agency pose any legal liability risks? Do I need to arrange for my own professional liability coverage, or would the agency or social work program policy also cover me?
12. If needed, does the agency offer Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act training? Does the agency require a criminal background check or drug screening? If so, does the university, college, or agency handle the logistics (to include payment), or is the student responsible for completing them and supplying the agency with the information?

Getting Started on Your Social Work Practice Career

Learning Outcomes

Use supervision and consultation to guide professional judgment and behavior.

Plan your learning experience as articulated through the learning plan.

Discuss the use of evidence-based practice in your practicum.

Chapter Outline

Getting Started in Your Practicum

Developing Relationships at Your Practicum Site

The Adult Learner: What Is It and Am I One?

What Kind of Learner Am I?

What Is My Role as a Student Learner?

Case Management

What Can I Expect from My Practicum?

What Will the Social Work Program Expect from Me?

The Learning Plan

What Can I Expect from My Practicum Site?

What Can I Expect from My Field Instructor?

What Can I Expect from My Faculty Liaison?

What Should I Expect from Myself?

Integrative Practice Field Seminar

What Can I Expect from the Integrative Practice Field Seminar?

What Can I Expect from My Seminar Instructor?

What Can I Expect from the Other Students?

What Should I Expect from Myself?

Summary

Student Scenario Postscripts

Getting Started in Your Practicum

That long-awaited point in every student's social work training has finally arrived. The semester in which you start your practicum has begun. The hours that you, your practicum site, and the social work program faculty spent in developing practicum plans have resulted in a placement. Everyone is ready to begin. Before you begin to read this chapter, pause and think about the questions that you have about your upcoming practicum experience; then make a list of your questions. For any questions that are not answered through your reading, consider consulting your field instructor, faculty liaison, field practicum manual (or possibly the field practicum policy section of your student handbook), or fellow students and then discussing and reflecting on the information that you gain.

With the implementation of its 2015 Educational Policy and Accreditation Standards (EPAS), the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) has embraced competency-based education that emphasizes 9 competencies and 31 behaviors. Social work competence is defined as "the ability to integrate and apply social work knowledge, values, and skills to practice situations in a purposeful, intentional, and professional manner to promote human and community well-being behaviors" (Council on Social Work Education [CSWE], 2015, p. 6). The nine competencies are as follows:

- Demonstrate ethical and professional behavior
- Engage diversity and difference in practice
- Advance human rights and social, economic, and environmental justice
- Engage in practice-informed research and research-informed practice
- Engage in policy practice
- Engage with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities
- Assess individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities
- Intervene with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities
- Evaluate practice with individuals, families, groups, organizations, and communities

The field experience component of social work education is designated by CSWE as the “signature pedagogy” of social work education because it “integrates the theoretical and conceptual contribution of the classroom with the practical world of the practice settings” (EPAS Policy M2.2, CSWE, 2015, p. 12). Simply put, signature pedagogy emphasizes the social work behaviors of thinking, performing, and acting ethically and with integrity (CSWE, 2015, p. 12). Signature pedagogy, however, encompasses individual and collaborative components—including observation, performance, analysis, interpretation, inquiry, and response—that become internalized as part of a professional’s practice (Shulman, 1999). This designation not only denotes that field education is a critical facet of social work education but also clearly stipulates that field education (i.e., the demonstration of behaviors) is a required component of the preparation of competent and effective social work practitioners and is equally as important as classroom experiences (Holloway, Black, Hoffman, & Pierce, 2009; Zastrow & Petracchi, 2009). In essence, a signature pedagogy requires you to be both active and interactive in your field experience while also being responsible to the client system, field instructor, and agency and to your social work program and fellow students (Wayne, Raskin, & Bogo, 2010, p. 332).

The field practicum experience is the integration of the theoretical knowledge you have gained in the classroom with the practice skills and behaviors you will learn in the field. You will obtain supervised practice experience in which you can apply the knowledge, skills, values, and ethics that you have learned in the classroom to achieve the purpose of social work, which is to “promote human and community well-being” (CSWE, 2015, p. 5). The practicum experience has long been considered a significant factor in the professional development of social work practitioners (Shaffer, 2013). Along with an educationally focused, community-based approach, the field experience provides an opportunity for you to conceptually explore and work with the theories, practice models, areas of knowledge and skills, ethical issues and practices, and fields of social work practice. While you may have completed volunteer or service learning experiences, your practicum will be unlike any other academic experience you have had to date, as you are required to apply your learning through behaviors, develop and maintain professional autonomy, and represent yourself as a social work professional. While you continue to be a “consumer” of learning, the practicum enables you to be a “provider” of social work services.

The readings, exams, role-plays, case vignettes, papers, and recordings you completed as preparation for social work practice will be put to the test in the next weeks and months. This text is intended to help, guide, and support you through this exciting, stimulating, and sometimes challenging learning and growth experience. This chapter will address the

issues to consider when beginning your practicum: relationship development, learning styles, expectations for the practicum (including competencies and behaviors), and the integrative practice field seminar.

Cameron Questions His Choice of Practicum

Cameron has accepted a practicum at a substance abuse treatment facility. He has completed the orientation and is contemplating his first day of practicum. However, he has begun to question his choice of a practicum site because he is unsure whether he can separate his role as a social worker from his status as a recovering person and Alcoholics Anonymous sponsor. He is concerned about the stresses that this practicum may create for him and wonders whether he may be tempted to begin drinking again. Should he raise these issues and fears with his field instructor?

Cameron's ethical dilemma is not an uncommon one. Many social workers have had life experiences that strengthen them as social work professionals but have concerns that these same experiences will impede their ability to be competent practitioners. The dilemma, as in Cameron's situation, focuses on the student's ability to blend the personal with the professional. These are important issues to consider as you begin to plan for the beginning of your practicum.

Following the all-important self-reflection process and the negotiation of your practicum arrangements—start date, schedule, and supervisory assignment—the real work begins. You must start by preparing emotionally and practically for your field experience.

Critical Thinking Question

Professionalism involves ongoing self-reflection. What are your thoughts and feelings about practicum expectations and opportunities?

Areas for you to consider as you anticipate the first days of your practicum include the following:

- Developing relationships with your field instructor, staff, client systems, and any future community partners and with the agency or social work program person(s) to whom you can turn with questions and problems and in cases of crises
- Identifying and understanding practicum expectations, time and role management, and your niche within the agency
- Planning your practicum goals—including the competencies to be mastered and the behaviors you will engage in to gain these competencies—in order to develop the learning plan and evaluative criteria
- Identifying your learning style and role
- Beginning to consider the amount and type of personal information you may want to share with your field instructor and staff (Helping professionals are often personally familiar with life traumas; if this is the case for you, consider whether you feel it appropriate to share your life experiences and, if so, how much.)

If you are completing your practicum in a location away from your university, including international sites, you may encounter different challenges with the beginning of your practicum. You may be familiarizing yourself with a new geographic area (or country) as well as its culture, state/national policies, and legal requirements. The most important thing to remember when you are in this situation is that learning is a process. You will be at your practicum for one to two semesters and will have time to acclimate to the new environment and demands. The suggestions made here will be applicable regardless of the location of your practicum, but give yourself time to adapt.

Developing Relationships at Your Practicum Site

Building relationships is essential to a successful and meaningful learning experience during your practicum. Relationships with coworkers, field instructors, faculty liaisons, and fellow practicum students that begin in the practicum may become lifelong personal and

professional associations. Many social workers go on to work, collaborate, and become friends with colleagues met during practicum. Social workers have long reported that the practicum and the field instructor relationships, in particular, are powerful and influential experiences that can also be challenging (Fox, 2004; Giddings, Vodde, & Cleveland, 2003).

Relationships with coworkers, field instructors, faculty liaisons, and fellow practicum students that begin in the practicum may become lifelong personal and professional associations.

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The relationships that emerge as meaningful for you may evolve for a variety of reasons. Even the student–field instructor relationship, though rooted in a formal mentoring structure, may result in a sharing of common interests and goals and in mutual learning. You may also establish relationships with staff at your practicum site because you share mutual interests and experiences. You should not assume that all meaningful, even powerful, learning needs to be based on positive experiences. You may find that skills and knowledge can be gained from relationships with agency staff, and even clients, that are not always pleasant; the most memorable and valuable learning may result from the most difficult, challenging, and (what seemed at the time) unsuccessful encounters that you experience. You should remain open to all potential relationships and consider each encounter an opportunity for learning. Do you recall any memorable learning that did not feel valuable at the time but proved powerful in retrospect?

In the development of relationships within the practicum setting, you can call on skills learned in your prerequisite coursework. For example, applying the rapport-building skills practiced through role-plays can be a first step toward integrating yourself into the community of the agency. You are encouraged to employ such engagement skills as initiating contact with others by introducing yourself, using others' names, and inquiring about staff roles and responsibilities and agency culture, history, and tradition. Maintain caution in initiating conversation related to personal information. Individuals and/or agency culture may not view this as appropriate.

The Adult Learner: What Is It and Am I One?

Social work education is based on the assumption that each student brings a lifetime of experiences to the practicum learning process and assumes responsibility for optimizing the learning potential of the classroom and field experiences. This conceptualization is known as the *adult learner model* of education (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011) and specifically encompasses the following components:

- *The need to know*—understanding why one needs to learn new information
- *The learner's self-concept*—being responsible for one's decisions and one's own life
- *The role of the learner's experiences*—having a deeper quality and quantity of learning as a result of living more years and having more life experiences than younger learners
- *Readiness to learn*—ensuring that the learning is appropriate to one's developmental phase in life
- *Orientation to learning*—being able to apply learning to real-life situations
- *Motivation*—being driven primarily by internal factors (satisfaction, self-esteem, and quality of life) to gain new learning (understanding and knowledge)

Along with using their life experiences to motivate themselves to gain further knowledge and enhance skill building, adult learners seek to determine and have control over their own learning (Knowles et al., 2005, pp. 173–174).

While you have been an adult learner for some time now, learning in the classroom environment can be more passive in nature. The social work practicum is an excellent opportunity for you to develop and utilize the adult learner model in its most interactive sense. Consider that you are entering a new realm of adult learning. By taking responsibility for your own professional growth and development in social work practice, you can explore and deepen your knowledge and skills for future practice. This approach enables you to build on the strengths previously developed through employment, volunteer/community service learning, coursework, other educational experiences, and life in general. Incorporating adult learner concepts into your practicum experience will

prepare you for future social work employment, in which you will have to function autonomously and professionally.

The ability of an adult learner to have meaningful learning experiences that contribute to the development of professional identity is influenced by a number of intrinsic and extrinsic factors. Intrinsically, your personality characteristics, cognitive development, learning style, and personal values impact the way in which you will learn in the professional social work setting (Memmott & Brennan, 1998; Shlomo, Levy, & Itzhaky, 2012). Extrinsically, such factors as organizational resources—specifically, satisfaction with your supervision—can relate positively to the development of your professional identity (Shlomo et al., 2012).

You can deepen your learning experience by exploring and identifying your personal traits and patterns with your field instructor as they pertain to the areas that impact your learning. Personal characteristics (e.g., gender, age, ethnicity) and values influence the way in which you perceive your learning experience, clients and coworkers, and supervision. Your phase of cognitive development determines your capabilities for learning, and each student possesses a unique learning style. All of these influences can have bearing on your satisfaction with the supervision that you receive.

Learning style refers to the way in which you most effectively receive, process, and integrate information. Your learning style determines your ability to perceive and process information and to translate that information into behavior. Identifying your learning style is particularly relevant for you and your field instructor as you develop the tasks and activities required for the learning agreement (e.g., the learning plan/contract that you negotiate with your field instructor) and the strategies for implementing and evaluating these activities. Although numerous frameworks are available for identifying your learning style, you may opt simply to consider your learning style, communicate your assessment to your field instructor, identify the field instructor's teaching style, and discuss the fit between the two.

What Kind of Learner Am I?

Corina knows from her practicum orientation that the social work program expects her to be an “adult learner,” but she is unsure exactly what this means in terms of her behaviors and performance at her practicum. She is feeling lost, overwhelmed, and intimidated by the staff and clients at the detention facility. She feels that she needs more direction than her field instructor seems to want to provide. She senses that her field instructor expects immediate independence. Corina is unsure whether other students feel this way, and she is reluctant to raise her fears with others. Should she ignore her feelings and dive into her work, or should she voice her anxiety to others (if so, to whom)?

Corina’s fears are not unusual, particularly for students in their first practicum experiences. Think of other new ventures on which you have embarked during your life. Until you have had the opportunity to familiarize yourself with the setting, the expectations, and the people involved, you may naturally question your decisions and abilities.

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Learning is a process; moreover, the ways in which we learn vary, but learning typically encompasses four basic elements (Fox, 2004, p. 121): (1) cognition—the student’s ability to perceive and gain knowledge, (2) conceptualization—the development of ideas and thoughts, (3) affect—the meaning (e.g., values, judgments, and feelings) attached to information, and (4) behavior—the actions that result from new learning. Fox (2004) additionally offers six suggestions for the adult learning in the social work practicum setting:

1. Learning must be active and meaningful.
2. The learner must be able to provide input into the goals and strategies for the learning experience.
3. The field instructor should identify and customize learning experiences to fit the student’s individual learning style.
4. Learning experiences should be built on previous experiences.
5. Learning must have practical applications.
6. The learner must have support for transitioning into an autonomous and independent practitioner.

Utilizing Fox's suggestions to frame the way in which we learn, consider now the variations in our [learning styles](#). The concept of experiential learning is particularly relevant for social work field education, as it is a "framework for examining and strengthening the critical linkages among education, work, and personal development" (Kolb, 2015, pp. 3–4). In collaboration with their field instructors, social work students build on the knowledge learned in the classroom to create their practice experience, thus transforming themselves from students into practitioners. The experiential learning model frames learning as a cycle that begins with *concrete experiences* that are *observed* and *reflected* upon. The reflections are *assimilated* as abstract concepts and tested with *active experimentation*. The tested actions become the basis for new experiences, and the cycle continues (Kolb, 2015, p. 51). Social work field experiences enable students to observe activities, to reflect on them with colleagues and the field instructor, to assimilate and integrate these reflections into the knowledge previously gained, and, finally, to apply (test) the new information in their own behaviors.

Although learning may be viewed as a cycle, consider the unique ways in which you learn. There are multiple learning style inventories and assessments that will help you to identify your particular learning style. One that may be of interest to you as a social work practicum student is the VARK, a tool in use for over two decades that helps individuals to explore modalities that may be preferred during learning experiences (Fleming, 2012; Fleming & Mills, 1992; <http://vark-learn.com>). VARK is an acronym that delineates learning preferences using four categories that help us to understand information preferences and strengths within the learning context. The four categories suggest that information is preferred as follows: visual (V)—diagrams, charts, and so on; aural (A)—lectures, discussions, and so on; read/write (R)—text-based (words); and kinesthetic (K)—action (e.g., demonstrations, simulations, and videos). To explore your learning styles, visit <http://vark-learn.com/>.

Practice Application 1.1 Learning and Teaching Style Exercise

The VARK Questionnaire is available online at www.varklearn.com/. You and your field instructor each can take a few moments to complete the 16-item questionnaire to learn more about your individual approaches to learning. Ask your field instructor how he or she perceives himself or herself as (1) a learner, (2) a teacher (and how his or her learning style

influences his or her approach to teaching), and (3) a supervisor. Most of us will adapt our learning style to create our approach to teaching; your field instructor's teaching style may therefore be simply an extension of his or her approach to learning.

How do your learning style and that of your field instructor fit, and how can the two of you negotiate the inevitable differences? Patience, creativity, and respect will be the keys to a successful negotiation. The following chart may help you compare your and your field instructor's learning styles.

Learning Style	Student	Field Instructor (as a learner)	Field Instructor (as a teacher)
Visual			
Aural			
Read/Write			
Kinesthetic			
Multimodal			

Adult learning can be both a process and an outcome. Although you are expected to function as an adult learner, the field experience can aid you in your development in that role. Students typically perceive field instructors as being educators as well as role models (Papadaki & Nygren, 2006). Your field instructor will both facilitate structured learning opportunities that are designed to allow you to experience the application of social work theory to practice and demonstrate competencies. Structured learning experiences may take the form of receiving an assignment from your field instructor, carrying out the assignment, and processing the experience with your field instructor. For example, after observing several intake assessments at the detention facility, Corina is assigned to conduct an intake interview for a new client. Armed with the knowledge of the intake process, she completes the assessment, documents the information gathered, submits the written assessment to her field instructor, and discusses the experience as well as the content with her field instructor. This structured process enables Corina to apply her knowledge and skills, reflect on the experience, and obtain feedback regarding her performance.

When problems arise in practicum between students and their field instructors, they may be rooted in the interaction of the students' and instructors' learning styles. Should you encounter a problem in your practicum experience, consider reevaluating the fit between your learning–teaching styles and those of your field instructor. When you have reconsidered the learning style issues, you may want to describe your perception of your learning style and needs to your field instructor.

You may find yourself learning differently at different points in your life and professional development. Students and field instructors often prefer learning through concrete experience because students can actively engage in the experience, which then provides the basis for the discussion and processing of that experience. There is no one right learning style. The key is to gain awareness of your individual style and then build on its characteristics as strengths. Despite the fact that your specific learning style will not determine a successful or unsuccessful practicum outcome, the optimal learning situation occurs when you and your field instructor adapt your teacher–learner styles for maximum fit.

Practice Application 1.2 Self-Assessment: What Do I Know and What Do I Need to Know?

In developing an understanding of your place as a student learner within this practicum experience, you can engage in a thorough self-assessment prior to its onset. This self-assessment can become a practice that continues throughout the entire learning experience and beyond. Your self-assessment should include consideration of such issues as these:

- What do I know about this agency—mission, services, population/community served, policies, funding, history, and reputation?
- What is the dominant culture of the organization? (That is, what professions and services are the primary focus? The secondary focus?)
- What knowledge, skills, and values do I bring to this experience?
- What knowledge and skills do I want to acquire from this experience?

- What are my strengths, particularly as they relate to the mission and services of this agency or organization?
- What role have students traditionally had at this site? If I am the first practicum student at this site, what do I think the student role might entail?

Think about other questions you would like to add to this list, and then share it with your field instructor.

Whether you consider yourself a new or a seasoned adult learner, the field practicum experience provides an excellent opportunity for you to assume responsibility for applying your previous and ongoing social work learning. As an adult learner, you must take the initiative to optimize your learning experience by integrating your existing knowledge and skills with newly learned skills in order to prepare for social work practice. The following discussion provides some suggestions to consider when you are using the adult learner model to enhance your practicum learning.

Embedded in developing relationships in the field site are the critical tasks of determining your role and integrating yourself into the overall functioning of the agency.

What Is My Role as a Student Learner?

Embedded in developing relationships in the field site are the critical tasks of determining your role and integrating yourself into the overall functioning of the agency. The practicum may be some students' first professional experience. It may be others' first time working in a social work setting or as a social work professional. For still others, it may just be one of many experiences in a social service setting. No matter where you are in your personal or professional life, the practicum is a new beginning. This is the first time you have functioned as an undergraduate- or graduate-level social worker. Such a new beginning

requires you to devote time and attention to gaining a clear understanding of your role within the unit/department, agency, and community.

Beginning the process of role identification by raising self-assessment questions brings you to consider the area of expectations. The following discussion will focus on the many and varied expectations that will be imposed on you as you move through this field experience.

Case Management

Since many social work students complete practica in organizations that offer case management services, let us explore, as an example of proactively assuming responsibility for your learning, the way in which you could approach a practicum that will engage you as a case management social worker. Consider the following list of activities you can pursue:

- Complete a self-assessment of your knowledge about the population with whom you will be working and about case management in general. Consider the level of your case management skills: Are you a beginner, or do you bring skills to this experience? Focus on your strengths, values, and concerns and on areas in which you need to gain skills.
- Conduct a literature search on case management approaches, particularly focusing on the population with whom you will be working and the skills and behaviors that will be needed to provide case management services to this population (again returning to your self-assessment of your knowledge and skills in this area).
- Review agency materials on case management approaches—specifically, the agency’s philosophy, practices, procedures, and evaluation.
- Discuss with your field instructor, agency staff, and other practicum students (as available) their perceptions of the delivery of case management in your practicum setting.

What Can I Expect from My Practicum?

Practicum is an interactive and structured learning process that places multiple expectations on you. The social work program will communicate educational expectations for students, agencies, and field instructors. As an adult learner, you, too, must develop expectations for your agency and your field instructor. Establishing a clear understanding of mutual expectations enhances your ability to determine goals, roles, and performance standards. A quality field experience is influenced by clarity of expectations, opportunities to integrate theory and practice and have diverse experiences, supervisory quality, and the university–agency relationship (Todd & Schwartz, 2009, p. 392). In a review of field education research, Bogo (2010, p. 123) reports that an optimal field experience includes a supportive field instructor who provides consistent supervision and critical feedback; creates an environment that is collaborative and focused on the student's learning needs, particularly in the areas of structure and autonomy; and emphasizes appropriate communication and reflection.

Depending on your level of training and experience, the first two to three weeks of your practicum may begin with more passive learning activities (e.g., undergoing orientation, observing others, and reading manuals and literature). This passive learner role may stifle your enthusiasm for beginning social work practice. The normal progression in learning social work practice is to move from passive to active learning. Although reading and observing others are essential to learning, you should begin engaging in more active learning within the first month of your practicum (depending on previous experience and current knowledge and skill level). Guided by ongoing assessment of your skills and comfort level, you and your field instructor should consistently infuse challenges into your work. You should transition from passive learning to active learning by engaging in such activities as assuming responsibility for another worker's case, co-facilitating a group or meeting, working more independently with clients or projects, and being observed by others. Your ultimate goal is to progress to competence at a higher level of autonomy at which you are solely responsible for cases or projects and group or meeting facilitation. Research has shown that students experience better outcomes when they are able to move from observational activities to participatory activities, connect theory and practice, and apply learning to practice (Lee & Fortune, 2013). By being prepared for your practicum experience, you can make the most of your learning opportunities.

You will begin your practicum with a wide range of learning needs and goals, including demonstrating behaviors and skills. In addition to accepting the objectives, competencies, and behaviors established by your social work program, you are encouraged to identify your individual educational agenda for supervision. For example, are you interested in learning general social work skills to be used with a broad population or in developing expertise in a specific area (such as working with children who are sexually abused, writing grants, or facilitating groups)?

Most new endeavors are accompanied with some anxiety, and practicum-related anxiety is not uncommon. You are in a new setting, applying newly learned skills in situations that impact human lives. Students report feeling concerns particularly in the areas of preparation (i.e., their lack of skills), ability to work with clients who may be different than themselves, safety, supervision (especially in regard to field instructors having enough time), and ability to balance the amount and difficulty of the work with personal commitments (Gelman, 2004; Gelman & Baum, 2010; Gelman & Lloyd, 2008). Many students view prepracticum anxiety as normal but appreciate support nonetheless (Gelman & Baum, 2010).

To optimize the experience, you and your field instructor should consider the following suggestions as you develop and negotiate your practicum experience (Gelman, 2004; Gelman & Lloyd, 2008; Munson, 2012):

- Seek opportunities to discuss your questions and concerns.
- Gain information about your site by talking with current and former practicum students and your field instructor before beginning your practicum.
- Observe the work of others.
- Gain exposure to specialized cases, practice approaches, and behaviors.
- Engage in collaborative co-facilitation activities.
- Invite and accept feedback and critiques of your work.
- Request more direct supervision.
- Develop more self-awareness and self-care strategies (e.g., stress management, yoga, meditation).

- Welcome support and encouragement (e.g., peer mentoring, integrative seminars, and online support groups or chat rooms).
- Obtain training in group work.
- Improve diagnostic skills.

Each practicum experience is unique, yet students often share similar transitions in their feelings of comfort and confidence. For example, at the end of a year-long practicum, a student reflecting on her experience noted that she had initially been unsure if she would be able to relate to clients, particularly those whose life experiences she did not share (Freeman, 2014, p. 7). Through practice and reflection, she came to realize that anxiety, discomfort, self-exploration, and challenge were part of the learning process and that, by becoming an ally with her clients and finding a balance between empowering them and collaborating with them, she became part of the change process (Freeman, 2014, p. 7).

What Will the Social Work Program Expect from Me?

Each accredited social work program must adhere to the requirements set forth by CSWE (2015). The program has flexibility in determining how best to deliver the practicum curriculum. The program will inform you and your fellow students of the expectations for fulfilling the field component of the social work degree. In all likelihood, your social work program will provide you with a manual or handbook that details practicum-related information, requirements, and resources. This document can be the reference that you first consult when you have questions about any aspect of your practicum. If the practicum handbook does not provide you with the needed information, you may look to your faculty and staff as resources.

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Each student must fulfill a number of administrative and curricular requirements to initiate and finalize arrangements for completing the field experience. As an adult learner, you are responsible for ensuring full awareness of all program requirements, which may include the following tasks:

- Completion of practicum forms required by the school and agency

- Verification of your health status and completion of any health-related requirements (e.g., immunizations, physical examination, tuberculosis skin test, and orientation and/or certification related to blood-borne pathogens, universal precautions, and Health Insurance Portability and Accountability Act [HIPAA] regulations)
- Verification of malpractice coverage
- Completion of personal information, which may include background criminal record and child and adult abuse registry checks, health insurance information, and/or drug screening

The Learning Plan

Ben Struggles with His Supervisor's Approach to Learning Plan Development

In Ben's practicum orientation, the social work program faculty described the completion of the learning plan as a process mutually negotiated between the field instructor and the student. Ben approached his field instructor, stating that they needed to develop his learning plan. The field instructor responded by asking Ben what he wanted to do in his practicum. She suggested that Ben should complete the learning plan and she would sign off on it. What do you think Ben should do at this point?

Although Ben's experience is (one hopes) unusual and unfortunate, his situation presents him with an opportunity to respond as an adult learner. Ben should not accept sole responsibility for completing the learning plan.

Your social work program will provide the processes and procedures for completing a practicum learning plan (which may be referred to as a learning agreement or learning contract), which is intended to be a collaboration among your social work program, the agency, and you. The completed learning plan then serves as a contract among all parties for the learning experience. Each of the items included in your learning plan will be directly linked to the CSWE's EPAS and is intended to help you and your field instructor integrate the theoretical knowledge and social work skills that you bring from your classroom experience into your practicum learning experience. In essence, the learning plan will help you to chart your practicum journey from beginning to end. You will be provided with the outcomes that your social work program has outlined for you, and you and your field instructor will then create activities and tasks that will enable you to gain the necessary competencies, which you will then be able to evaluate and refine as needed. While this process may imply that you will reach the end of your educational journey, the reality is, in fact, that your learning plan will serve as just one segment of your professional development. [Box 1.1](#) provides an example of the areas in which your social work program may ask you to develop activities and tasks to achieve social work outcomes leading to competency in social work practice. Each social work program develops learning plans

that are consistent with the program's mission, focus, and operationalization of the EPAS competencies, but the items included in [Box 1.1](#) provide a general idea of those areas you may be expected to address.

Box 1.1 General Goals for the Practicum Learning Plan

The learning plan may ask you develop tasks, activities, outcomes, and evaluative strategies to address a variety of social work practice skills, including but not limited to the following:

- *Assessment and Intervention*
 - Engagement in the generalist practice of social work services
 - Demonstration of the generalist practice roles of broker, advocate, educator, case manager, counselor, facilitator, researcher, or outreach worker
 - Development of helping relationships through activities of initial contact, assessment, intervention, and termination
 - Facilitation or co-facilitation of one or more task, self-help, and/or support groups
 - Coordination with other agencies on behalf of one or more client systems
 - Advocacy on behalf of clients
 - Engagement in community and/or organizational practice to improve the social welfare of one or more client systems
- *Human Behavior and Social Environment*
 - Application of theories appropriately using a lifespan development perspective
- *Diversity*
 - Development of cultural competence skills and knowledge to work effectively with client systems that are diverse in terms of race, national origin, ethnicity, physical or mental ability, sex, gender identification, sexual orientation, and religious or spiritual belief systems

- *Policy Practice*
 - Identification and assessment of the impact of relevant social policies on client systems, social agencies, and the social work profession
- *Social and Economic Justice*
 - Development of an understanding of an area of inequality and injustice affecting the client system(s) in order to work toward a social justice goal
- *Evaluation/Research*
 - Collection, analysis, and use of data to evaluate practice interventions or a social program in order to enhance services provided to client systems
- *Values/Ethics*
 - Identification of social work values relative to the practice setting
 - Identification of, reflection on, and demonstration of ability to resolve practice-based ethical dilemmas in a professional, responsible manner

The development of the learning contract should occur in a stepwise progression. As an adult learner, you are responsible for initiating and coordinating the learning contract development process. Figure 1.1 outlines a general plan for completing your learning contract. The development of your learning contract may have begun during the interviewing and placement process, possibly even before you or the agency made a commitment to the specific practicum arrangement. After you confirm your practicum site, further consider your expectations for learning at the agency. Begin by reviewing the agency's mission and services, and discuss your specific practicum roles and responsibilities with your field instructor. At this point, you can develop a list of potential tasks and activities to be completed throughout the practicum and consider how the potential tasks and activities would help you to achieve the educational objectives, competencies, and behaviors required by your social work program. Also consider whether and how your field instructor will evaluate your progress toward the behaviors that measure the competencies.

Figure 1.1

Completing Your Practicum Learning Plan

Step 1: Conceptualize (the “Big Picture”)

- Identify goals and competencies for the social work program.
- Identify goals for the agency and field instructor.
- Identify goals and competencies for yourself.
- Identify actual learning opportunities available and possible at the practicum site.

Step 2: Develop Tasks, Activities, and Behaviors

- Using the social work program expectations as a guide, you and your field instructor can develop a list of competencies, tasks, activities, and behaviors to be included in the learning plan.

Step 3: Draft

- Develop a draft of planned tasks and activities, using the format/form provided by the social work program and identifying the following:
 - Specific competencies, tasks, activities, and behaviors
 - Measurable outcomes that are consistent with those behaviors related to the competencies identified within the CSWE Educational Policies and Standards (EPAS) and by your social work program
 - Appropriate assessment strategies and tools to evaluate the previously identified outcomes
 - Timeframe
 - Evaluative criteria for each competency, task, activity, and behavior
 - Persons and resources required for each area

Step 4: Review the Draft

- All relevant persons (field instructor, task instructor, other staff who will be responsible for any of your activities, faculty liaison, and, of course, you) should review the draft of the learning plan.

Step 5: Revise

- Using the input obtained from the review, revise your learning plan.

Step 6: Finalize

- Complete a final version, obtain the needed signatures, and submit the plan (by the social work program’s due date).

Step 7: Integrate

- Regularly integrate your learning plan into your supervisory session as a checklist for progress and evaluation.

After developing the practicum learning plan and activities, the next step is to invite your field instructor’s ideas for new learning and consider tasks, activities, and behaviors to include in the learning contract. Because the development of this document is a collaborative process, you can engage in ongoing discussion and negotiation with your field instructor and faculty liaison in anticipation of its finalization.

The learning agreement should delineate a plan that will allow you to fulfill the social work program’s practicum goals, which articulate student roles, tasks and activities, and behaviors planned for the practicum, along with the evaluation criteria by which your progress and performance will be assessed. In order for the learning contract to be an effective tool for your growth, the tasks, activities, and behaviors outlined within the contract should be competency-based; specific; challenging; relevant; appropriate to the setting and to your level of experience, interests, and goals; and measurable. You and your field instructor should determine items for inclusion that are realistically achievable given your schedule, timeframe, skill level, and access to supervision and resources.

Students often feel ill prepared to assert themselves in the development of specific tasks and responsibilities to be completed in the practicum. Being an adult learner, you are responsible for conveying to your field instructor and practicum faculty your skills, interests, values, and goals. Students' satisfaction with practicum and perceived skill levels are shown to relate to the value, pleasure, and self-efficacy of their experience along with a consistently increasing number of activities of all kinds (Fortune, Lee, & Cavazos, 2005; Lee & Fortune, 2013). Although the agency, field instructor, and social work program may have far more experience in developing learning contracts, the document becomes individualized only with the input you provide from your unique perspective as a student learner. You will be able to own the educational experience if you feel invested through active participation in the process.

Keep in mind the possibility that your goals and interests will not always mesh with the structure and limitations of the practicum site. The agency may have conflicting policies, inadequate resources, and other constraints that will prohibit you from engaging in all potential learning experiences. The learning plan should also serve as a mechanism to ensure that you are learning social work skills and behaviors, as opposed to fulfilling a needed role at the agency (e.g., typing, filing, providing child care or transportation). Should this situation arise, discuss with your field instructor the possibility of gaining the desired experiences outside your practicum agency. For instance, if you are interested in developing your group-work skills in a way the agency cannot accommodate, you may want to explore group opportunities in a related agency setting. If you feel your self-advocacy efforts have been unsuccessful in negotiating with your field instructor, you may consider discussing the issue with your faculty liaison.

Key to the development of the learning agreement/contract is the evaluative component. Students and field instructors should always be vigilant about the primary purpose of the practicum: You are working at the agency to learn competencies, behaviors, and skills that will enable you to be an effective social work practitioner. Your goal is to acquire, learn, and demonstrate social work skills for your future as a social worker. Although your goal is to be a competent practicum student and eventually an effective employee, these are not the only aims of this experience. Therefore, include each task, activity, role, and responsibility in the plan only after considering its learning value based on the evaluation criteria to be used.

Amina Is Unclear about the Learning Plan Development Process

Amina is a U.S. Army veteran who has experienced post-traumatic stress disorder (PTSD) as a result of her childhood experiences as a Bosnian refugee and later as a result of her military service. She is completing her first practicum at a veterans center and is engaged primarily in case management for veterans who seek help for PTSD, relationship and family challenges, and housing, financial, and employment needs. Amina is finding it difficult to begin work on her learning plan. She is uncertain if she is to initiate the writing or wait until her field instructor provides direction, and she is nervous about discussing her concerns with her field instructor. As a result, she is immobilized, and the due date for the learning plan is quickly approaching. Her field instructor has not mentioned the learning plan.

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Box 1.2 Amina's Learning Plan

To the Student and Field Instructor—About the Learning Agreement (LA):

The Learning Agreement (LA) is intended to guide the student's learning experience. The LA should be the product of collaboration among the Field Instructor, the Task Instructor (if one is involved in the practicum), and the student. The LA will be the basis for the Final Evaluation (FE) completed by the Field Instructor.

Instructions for Completing the LA:

1. The student will develop ideas for the LA based on prior discussion of practicum activities with the Field Instructor and suggestions from the Faculty Liaison. The student should write a rough draft and present the draft for discussion to the Field Instructor. All involved parties must agree to the contents of the final document.
2. The LA serves as a guide to assess learning and performance throughout the semester. The LA also guides the mid-semester site visit by the Faculty Liaison to assess the progress of the student toward fulfilling roles, tasks, and activities. If needed, mid-semester adjustments to the LA can be made at the site visit.
3. At the end of the semester, the LA will be used as a basis for assessing student learning and performance. Field Instructors should use their copy of the LA form to complete the

FE.

To the Student—Helpful Hints for the LA

Format

For each competency addressed in a semester, one or more tasks or behaviors that directly relate to the competency are noted in the LA. Tasks and activities developed by the student and Field Instructor will serve to operationalize the competencies. Use action verbs to describe your work (e.g., you are conducting, participating in, attending, collecting, compiling, analyzing, facilitating, interviewing, or organizing various activities). Every task that is completed and/or activity in which you plan to participate should be noted in the Agreement as addressing one or more practice behaviors.

Evaluation Methods

Please note the method by which your Field Instructor will evaluate your work. For example, your Field Instructor may review your written work (e.g., daily logs, case notes, progress notes, treatment plans, process recordings, and/or summary recordings), directly observe your work, discuss your work in individual and/or group supervision, review audio- or videotapes of your work, or use other methods. More than one method of evaluation is recommended for the practicum.

Practicum Competencies (Competencies are followed by tasks and activities)

Assessment and Intervention	
Engage in generalist practice of social work services	
Tasks	Evaluation Methods
As a case manager in the Veterans Center, I will work with the veterans and their families individually and in groups and advocate for policy changes within our organization.	I will document my activities and discuss with my field instructor during supervision sessions who will also review my documentation.
Demonstrate generalist practice roles of broker, advocate, educator, case manager, counselor, facilitator, researcher, or outreach worker	
Tasks	Evaluation Methods
In my role as a case manager, I will regularly assess my clients' needs, make appropriate referrals, and facilitate clients' access to services and resources.	I will document my activities with clients and discuss with my field instructor who will also review my documentation. My field instructor will observe me at least one time/week.
Develop helping relationships through activities of initial contact, assessment, intervention, and termination	
Tasks	Evaluation Methods
Using the Center's case management protocol, I will demonstrate the ability to engage with my clients, conduct ongoing assessment/planning, work with my clients to implement our mutually agreed-on intervention, monitor the individualized case management plan, and terminate when appropriate.	I will document my activities with clients and discuss with my field instructor who will also review my documentation. My field instructor will observe me at least one time/week with clients and in staff case conferences where I will present information on my clients.
Facilitate or co-facilitate one or more task, self-help, and/or support groups	
Tasks	Evaluation Methods
With my field instructor, I will co-facilitate the weekly women's PTSD support group and participate in decision making regarding group focus, activities, and evaluation.	I will make weekly group and individual notes to document group progress. My field instructor will observe my group facilitation skills.
Coordinate with other agencies on behalf of one or more client systems	
Tasks	Evaluation Methods
I will work on behalf of my clients to access services, as needed, in the areas of housing, employment, financial assistance, and mental and physical health care.	I will document my activities with clients and discuss with my field instructor who will also review my documentation.
Advocate on behalf of clients	
Tasks	Evaluation Methods
As needed, I will advocate in writing and in person on behalf of my clients within my agency and other agencies to ensure they receive adequate resources and services for which they are eligible.	I will document my activities with clients and discuss with my field instructor who will also review my documentation. In situations where it is possible, my field instructor will observe my advocacy skills.
Engage in community and/or organizational practice to improve the social welfare of one or more client systems	

Practice Application 1.3 Watch Your Body

Electronically recording your social work practice can be a valuable experience (if a somewhat painful one, at least in the beginning). When possible, audio- or videotape yourself engaged in your practicum activities. If you have the opportunity to videotape yourself, review the recording and then review it again with the audio muted. Critically examine your body language and nonverbal behavior and the client's body language and nonverbal behavior in reaction to *your* behavior. Do you see things during this review that you did not see before? Record your perceptions in a journal entry, and share them with a member of your practicum team.

Integrating evaluation from the beginning provides you and your field instructor with the opportunity to engage in a meaningful and ongoing evaluative process throughout the learning experience. Having clear and diverse strategies for measuring each task, activity, and behavior enables you and your field instructor to engage in assessment and to modify the learning contract, as needed, to reflect your growth and progress and agency realities. To integrate intermediate benchmarks and feedback, actively use the learning contract to guide discussions with your field instructor *throughout* the practicum experience. Do not wait for all assessments to be made and conveyed at the end of the practicum.

Using a range of evaluative techniques will provide you and your field instructor with comprehensive and helpful feedback on your learning and performance. These techniques include direct observation by your field instructor or other staff of you performing your practicum tasks and activities and presenting and discussing your work in group supervision/case conferences and review of your written work, audio- or videotapes of you in action, process/summary recordings of your encounters with clients, and the daily log in which you record the ways you spend your time. When the time comes for the formal evaluation forms to be completed, you and your field instructor will have ample data from which to evaluate your progress and performance.

Incorporating evaluative standards into the learning agreement phase maintains your and your field instructor's focus on the goals of the field experience and establishes the basis for supervisory sessions over the course of the practicum. Thinking forward to the evaluation of your experience provides you and your field instructor with an opportunity to discuss the legacy that you hope to leave as a result of the time you spend at the agency. Your legacy might be a project you complete, a program you develop and/or implement, a grant proposal you write, a resource directory you compile, or a practicum student orientation you create. Emphasizing evaluation built on competency-based student learning outcomes as part of the learning environment provides an appropriate and valuable indoctrination for you into the real world of contemporary social work practice, in which considerable attention is paid to evaluation and outcomes.

What Can I Expect from My Practicum Site?

When agencies and field instructors volunteer to work with practicum students, they devote considerable time and resources to the endeavor. At the same time, agencies and field instructors derive a number of benefits from the experience, including professional development; new ideas, perspectives, and work from students; links to a college/university; challenges to agency practice; and enhancement of the agency profile (Barton, Bell, & Bowles, 2005).

As you begin your practicum, gaining an understanding of recent and ongoing changes to agency work and resources is particularly important. Consider these changes that are virtually universal in their impact on agencies and organizations (Mirabito, 2012):

- Shifting demographic characteristics of client groups, including increases in the number and diversity of persons being served who are older adults, members of nontraditional families, veterans, persons with disabilities, immigrants and refugees, and persons experiencing mental illness
- Increased diversity in the clients' race, ethnicity, sexual orientation, religious and spiritual practices, and living arrangements
- Increased needs for services occurring as resources are decreasing
- Impact on accessibility of services of managed health care, the Affordable Care Act, and changing policy on mental health care

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Recognizing the importance and value of the practicum experience, individual field instructors and agencies develop and maintain differing standards of professional social work behavior and practice for practicum students. Agency and supervisor expectations may range from well defined and structured to open ended and informal. As an adult learner, you are responsible for ensuring that you have a thorough knowledge and understanding of both agency and field instructor expectations.

You can expect that your field instructor will initiate and facilitate an orientation at the outset of the practicum experience. Some agencies provide students with the opportunity to participate in new-employee orientation, whereas other agencies develop orientations specific to practicum students. Some agencies do not provide formal orientations but

instead engage in an informal orientation process with each student. You should inquire about the type of orientation process your agency provides. Regardless of the type of orientation format, you should obtain information on the agency's and field instructor's expectations of you and clarify your expectations of the agency and the field instructor. Some general guidelines for agency orientation include the following:

- Completion of required agreements with the social work program regarding practicum expectations, precautions, and opportunities
- Agency tour (including your assigned workspace) and introductions of key staff with whom you will have contact
- Clarification of rules for use of office space (e.g., is it to be shared, used for client interviews, locked?)
- Information regarding agency policies and practices (e.g., schedule, time cards/clocks, parking, breaks [times, locations, restrictions], identification, credentials, sick/vacation leave, confidentiality, dress code, management of client/case information, and documentation)
- Information on equipment and communication systems (e.g., telephone, fax, computer, mailboxes, messaging), clarification regarding student use of equipment, and instructions for use (to include passwords and codes)
- Clarification on policies regarding use of agency and personal electronic devices for completing tasks in the workplace and communication with clients, agency staff, and others. Specifically, be sure you are clear about using your personal electronic devices and social media to document your work, communicate with clients, and share information with others.
- Information on policies regarding reimbursement for practicum-related expenses (e.g., personal vehicle mileage incurred as a result of practicum-related travel)
- Information concerning your responsibilities for after-hour emergencies involving your clients
- Safety information, including procedures within the agency, with clients, in the community, and on home visits

In addition to practical and procedural matters, an introduction to ethically related information is critical. Ethics training should address such issues as professional ethics and liability, areas of risk and appropriate responses, ethical decision making, and relevant federal, state, and local laws and regulations (Reamer, 2012, p. 10). If you are working in a setting that provides direct services, you will be instructed in the agency's assessment tools, intervention techniques, evaluation methods, documentation, protocols for privileged communication, confidentiality, informed consent, boundary issues (particularly in electronic communication), clients' rights, and termination of services—all of these areas have implications for your ability to ethically practice social work (Reamer, 2012).

What Can I Expect from My Field Instructor?

Rosa Struggles with Her Mental Health

Shortly after starting her practicum, Rosa celebrated her 21st birthday. On that occasion, she decided that she would no longer take the medication that she had been taking since age 10 to control her Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD). She believed that she had outgrown the problem. She did not consult with anyone or share her decision about discontinuing the medication. Within the first weeks of her practicum, Rosa began to experience a variety of problems; she had difficulties focusing her attention on assigned orientation materials, following instructions, and completing tasks and was missing social cues, demonstrating obstinate and confrontational behaviors, and monopolizing conversations. Having considerable personal and professional knowledge of ADHD, Rosa's field instructor suspected that Rosa experienced ADHD and that the changes in her behaviors were the result of her discontinuing medication.

- Does this situation present an ethical dilemma? If so, why? If not, why?
- Would it be ethically appropriate for Rosa's field instructor to confront Rosa with her suspicions, or would doing so be an infringement of personal boundaries?
- What would you do if you were Rosa and your field instructor addressed this issue with you?

Critical Thinking Question

Utilizing the National Association of Social Workers *Code of Ethics* (2008) to guide your social work practice, which standards in the *Code* are relevant in Rosa's situation?

In thinking about the potential ethical and/or boundary issues present within this scenario, consider the idea that the instructors strive to challenge students on their learning edge, which is where they are challenged with ideas and tasks just immediately beyond their grasp. If just beyond what they are currently capable of doing, students will struggle, but not become frustrated and disillusioned (Groccia, 1997). According to students, field instructor qualities that enhance learning include being available, respectful, responsive, supportive, fair, objective, and knowledgeable (Barretti, 2009). Being able to observe professionals (in practice, analytical and critical thinking, and reflection), applying new information to social work practice using evidence-based approaches, receiving regular and balanced feedback, and having reflective activities that allow for self-critique are important to the learning process (Barretti, 2009; Bogo, 2010). You should feel that your field instructor is pushing the limits of your abilities but supporting your growth in the process through such strategies as these:

- Committing to your educational growth and development
- Serving as a mentor who will provide ongoing, balanced feedback that includes your strengths and areas for growth
- Serving as a role model for social work practice
- Supervising the practicum and evaluating areas such as teaching style, performance expectations, formal and informal availability (and contacts if she or he is unavailable), and supervision schedule and format
- Developing a plan for learning, including the orientation approach (schedule, activities, staff involvement, and student preparation), opportunities to observe (shadow) field instructors or other staff and students, case/project assignments, and staff and student collaborations

- Sharing student-related information, including practicum structure and parameters, the organization's formal and informal strategic plans that guide programming, agency culture, and student roles as distinct from volunteer roles
- Clarifying physical and emotional boundaries as they relate to the practicum experience
- Providing information you need to learn and function as a practicum student within the department, agency, and community, including the following:
 - Agency/professional information and resources, including policy/procedure manuals, resource directories, readings, and staff orientation materials
 - Administrative/logistical information, including attendance policy, parking, and identification of yourself as a student
- Providing community resource information, including referral/referring groups, the provision of information for referrals, and contact information
- Encouraging learning opportunities, including annual meetings, conferences, fund-raising events, agency board meeting, and lobby days
- Providing information regarding appropriate behavior, dress, and interaction with clients, staff, administration, and community professionals, including information regarding such activities as identifying yourself as a student, seeking out assignments from the field instructor and other staff, reading during practicum hours, completing homework during practicum hours, using cell phones and electronics during practicum hours, and collaborating with staff and community professionals
- Outlining expectations and providing balanced feedback regarding writing and speaking behaviors and skills
- Encouraging your critical thinking about practice by, in turn, encouraging questions and providing multiple sources of knowledge

As the field instructor–student relationship is key to having a meaningful practicum experience, having clear expectations about that relationship is critical to the practicum process. Your field instructor and you should discuss your educational needs, the structure and focus of your supervisory sessions, the way in which feedback will be given, and strategies for handling conflict (Miehls, Everett, Segal, & Du Bois, 2013). Ideally,

feedback will be provided on an ongoing basis, presented in a balanced manner (including strengths and areas for growth), and based on direct observation (Karpenko & Gidycz, 2012).

What Can I Expect from My Faculty Liaison?

Your social work program practicum faculty can be a valuable resource as you plan and complete your field experience. Although the role of the practicum faculty member assigned as your resource or liaison varies among programs, you can generally expect the faculty member to

- Serve as a liaison among your social work program, the practicum site, and you to promote achieving the competencies and behaviors defined by your program (CSWE, 2015).
- Orient you to the practicum process and social work program expectations of you, the field instructor, and the agency.
- Provide information on and assistance in developing the learning agreement/contract, including suggestions for tasks and activities, evaluation criteria, and outcomes.
- Offer support regarding practicum issues by responding to questions, mediating conflicts, implementing changes, and advocating as needed on your behalf.
- Be actively involved in the selection, orientation, training, and support of practicum sites.
- Monitor the practicum experience to ensure that you, with the support of your field instructor, are meeting the goals and learning the competencies and behaviors established by you and the social work program. (Note: Most social work practicum faculty will conduct at least one on-site visit each semester to the practicum site to meet with you and your field instructor to discuss tasks, activities, progress toward goals, and any problems or concerns.)
- Be available throughout the practicum experience to assess and reassess your interests, goals, skill development, and professional aspirations.

- Be available to provide you with a safe space to process your practicum experiences and challenges.

What Should I Expect from Myself?

As you move through your practicum, establishing high standards of performance and learning for yourself can result in valuable learning. Bogo and colleagues (2006) report that field instructors generally value students' abilities to demonstrate procedural skills (e.g., assessment, intervention, documentation, and communication) along with their approach to learning, professional behavior, and ability to conceptualize practice and relational capacities. Consider also these insights from field instructors when asked about the characteristics and behaviors they associate with outstanding practicum students (Regehr, Bogo, Donovan, Anstice, & Lim, 2012):

- Self-awareness and the ability to articulate learning needs
- Compassion and respectfulness
- Motivation, self-direction, and independence
- Confidence, competence (including cultural competence), and the ability to articulate and implement processes and attain goals
- Professionalism
- Flexibility and openness
- Commitment to social justice and the ability to work with vulnerable and marginalized populations

Conversely, field instructors view students as failing to fulfill the expectations for professional social work practice when they demonstrate a lack of compassion, empathy, knowledge, direction, motivation, and enthusiasm (Regehr et al., 2012, p. 315).

Practice Application 1.4 Becoming a Reflective Practitioner

Even before you begin your practicum, you can begin to develop your reflective practice skills by journaling about the experience. Your journal can include your thoughts and feelings about your practicum experience as well as reflections on your learning, progress toward goals, successes and challenges faced within the practicum, and questions for your field instructor, faculty, and yourself. Before making your daily entry, review your previous entry to enable you to reflect on progress, setbacks, and changes. Be sure that, at the end of your practicum experience, you return to your journal to assess your growth.

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A key aspect of self-expectations is a commitment to reflective practice, a thoughtful, yet critical processing of your practice experiences. Engaging in reflection can help you to interpret meaning, develop understanding, and clarify actions (Furman, Coyne, & Negi, 2008). Such reflection can allow you to view yourself within the larger context of your practicum and the profession (Mailloux & Whitten, 2009). Strategies for reflective practice may include maintaining a practicum journal or log, developing a professional social work portfolio (a paper, electronic, or web-based selection of materials from your practicum experience, which includes but is not limited to assessments, evaluations, samples of your written and oral work, and your résumé), and creating a personal resource file. Engaging in such critical reflection is an opportunity to step back from your practice and connect with your feelings, ways of knowing, and understanding of the role that your own and others' values and ethics play (Bay & MacFarlane, 2011).

Self-expectations should also include reflections about and further development of culturally competent practice. Reflecting on the evolution of your own cultural competence skills and behaviors is an important focus for your practicum. In your social work coursework, you have learned about the need for social workers to develop “knowledge, attitudes, understanding, self-awareness, and skills” that prepare them to practice cultural competence with clients from diverse backgrounds (Barker, 2014, p. 102). The concept of [cultural humility](#) provides an expanded view of cultural competence. First introduced by Tervalon and Murray-Garcia (1998) for health care providers, cultural humility is achieved when a professional is able and willing to be flexible and humble enough to abandon stereotypes and false securities about cultural knowledge, to approach the cultural dimensions of each client assessment individually, and to “say that they do not know when