



## Placements in Social Justice Education

*Author(s)*

*Adrienne Dessel, PhD  
University of Michigan*

*Susan Wiant Crabb, MS, MSW  
University of Michigan*

As the retrenchment of resources for social services undermines the ability of agencies to offer placement to social work interns, the development of new placements is a major concern of field educators. Field sites integrating micro and macro social work practice are sorely lacking (Carey & McArdle, 2011). The University of Michigan School of Social Work has spearheaded a number of innovative approaches to field placement. The School's Office of Field Instruction places over 300 students each year. Students are placed according to their practice method (Interpersonal Practice, Community Organization, Management of Human Services, and Social Policy and Evaluation) and practice area (Health, Mental Health, Communities and Social Systems, Children, Youth in Families and Society, and Aging in Families and Society). The Program on Intergroup Relations (IGR) at the University of Michigan has served as an effective placement for social work interns from a variety of practice methods and practice areas.

The Program on Intergroup Relations (IGR), located within the College of Literature, Science and the Arts at the University of Michigan, offers social justice education to the university community as well as to the wider Ann Arbor and metro Detroit community. Since 2008, the program has been the site of internships for students from the University of Michigan School of Social Work. In placing students at IGR, the Office of Field Instruction reviews students' goal statements and resumes, then refers students whose learning goals will be best met by IGR. Interest in social justice issues is a prerequisite. Students who have shown initiative in the area of social justice, are interested in social identity and intergroup relations, and are not afraid to challenge the status quo have been found to be the best fit for IGR.

Three first- or second- year social work interns per year are housed in the program; in the past, these students have been in a macro concentration, but this year a student in the interpersonal practice concentration will have her internship at IGR. The program is also well-suited to dual-degree interns; it was recently a placement for a student seeking a MSW and a MSI from the School of Information Science with a specialization in library science. Interns at IGR learn social work skills in several areas of the program. They lead workshops and contribute to curriculum. They participate in empirical research sponsored by the program, and they also have the opportunity to help to advertise and

promote IGR.

Students participate in the educational projects sponsored by IGR, workshops throughout the university, and undergraduate courses. Social work interns co-facilitate two to four Common Ground workshops per semester, which are offered to student organizations, residence halls, classes and other communities. Workshops, which last between one and three hours, engage participants in dialogues about social identity and social justice. Topics include segregation on college campuses, the impact of social identity on conflict and communication, redlining in Detroit, power and influence in groups, media messages, privilege and oppression, and civic engagement. Social work interns also contribute to shaping the curriculum and developing exercises for full-semester undergraduate courses on social identity and intergroup dialogue.

Social work interns are an integral part of teams conducting empirical research at IGR. Research topics include the outcomes of the Common Ground workshops, explorations of white racial identity, analysis of lesbian, gay and bisexual student participation in intergroup dialogue, and the processes and outcomes of an Arab/Jewish dialogue course. Social work interns take on many roles in the research process, from facilitating qualitative interviews to leading focus groups to consulting on Nvivo software. One intern helped write a grant for a research project, and another intern is working on a book chapter.

Interns are also involved in helping to advertise and promote IGR. One intern developed marketing and recruitment materials for both undergraduate and graduate students that aim to involve under-represented social identity groups. She produced a video of student reflections on the IGR program; the link to the video is available in the Resources section of the *Field Educator*. The dual-degree intern developed a library collection development policy which supports the infrastructure of a unique and much-needed social justice education library.

This year IGR will be the placement for an intern specializing in interpersonal practice. The intern will provide direct practice in the community. One project will be to lead meetings to promote intergroup dialogue about race among community members of different racial and ethnic groups.

Like other interns at the University of Michigan School of Social Work, interns at IGR have weekly individual supervision by a licensed social worker. For example, in supervision, the interns debrief their experience as Common Ground workshop leaders, discuss ethical dilemmas, and reflect on their own social identity and the integration of social justice into social work practice. Group supervision is planned for the future. Many interns involved in Common Ground also attend a weekend retreat at the beginning of the year and participate monthly in staff meetings.

As part of their Educational Agreement, social work interns identify fourteen assignments, to be

completed throughout the term, which will serve as the focus for their learning at IGR. Each student has an on-site visit with the field liaison and field instructor midway through the term. This allows all parties to ensure that the student is on track and is working on the assignments designated in the Educational Agreement. At the end of the term, the student and field instructor each evaluate the student according to the fourteen CSWE competencies. The evaluation includes a written narrative in order to encourage interns to utilize self-reflection, a foundation of social work practice.

The provision of social work internships in the Program on Intergroup Relations has been a welcome innovation. Within the placement, social work students have the opportunity to engage with the complicated concept of social identity in both micro and macro practice. As part of interdisciplinary, diverse research teams, they learn about both quantitative and qualitative research methods. In all their interventions, students are critically engaged in an analysis of power, privilege and oppression. These are all needed skills as professional social workers move into a work world that continues to negotiate the complex interplay of identity, power and justice.

### **References**

Carey, M. & McArdle, M. (2011). Can an observational field model enhance critical thinking and generalist practice skills? *Journal of Social Work Education, 47*(2), 357-365.