



MSW Student Field Readiness: “Boot Camp”

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The California State University, Fullerton (CSUF) MSW Program, one of seven MSW programs in the greater Los Angeles area, began in the fall of 2007. One of the new Field Director’s first goals was to invite seasoned field instructors to form a Field Advisory Committee (FAC). The FAC began to meet monthly, to elect officers, draft bylaws, and discuss what their role would be within the CSUF MSW program. These discussions revealed the feeling on the part of field instructors that the new generation of MSW students was younger than in the past, had less “life experience,” and thus required more training time on the part of agencies to prepare them to deliver services. Agencies expected students to be more knowledgeable about mandated reporting laws, social work ethics, and confidentiality. They also thought that students lacked understanding of how to use supervision and adopt a professional attitude.

In response to the concerns of the FAC, the field department decided to capitalize on the two weeks prior to first-year field placement by instituting an intensive field readiness program on days that would have been field days. These four days of training became known as “Boot Camp.” Boot Camp has several components: a “Welcome to the Profession” presentation, workshops led by community social workers, a self-awareness exercise, an exercise about hopes and fears for field placement, and a community immersion exercise.

Welcome to the Profession

The first day commences with a “Welcome to the Profession” presentation. The concept of social work as a professional “family” is introduced, along with the presentation of our values, rules, ethics, conduct, boundaries, etc. The presenter also discusses field education, acknowledges some of the anxiety that students often have, and addresses competence, personal and professional growth, and students’ roles as adult learners. The welcoming remarks also introduce the students to some of the familiar jargon of the profession such as “start where the client is,” our social work toolbox, flexibility, self-awareness, and self-care.

Presentations by Field Instructors

Community social workers, many of whom are field instructors and/or FAC members, lead

workshops about field placement. Presenters are given time to talk about why they entered the profession, and to describe their career in social work. The order of presentations varies each year depending on the availability and schedules of the presenters. However, the following are always included: child abuse reporting (presented by a supervisor from our child welfare agency), elder abuse reporting (presented by supervisors from Adult Protective Services), the Tarasoff law, and the NASW Code of Ethics, with vignettes of ethical dilemmas. Preparation for field supervision is discussed, along with examples of how supervision might best be utilized. These presentations are all interactive and encourage students to bring up any questions that they may have about field work or the profession of social work.

Self-awareness Exercises

Reflection is a primary goal of social work education; students are guided toward self-awareness by asking them to journal, as well as to write process recordings that focus on “gut-level” feelings and counter-transference. However, field faculty noted that some beginning students interpreted reflective questions as intrusive and had a poor understanding of the importance of self-awareness to relationships with clients. In order to address this early in their education, in the past two years we have included two self-awareness exercises. In one, students place small pieces of colored paper representing emotions (anger, sadness, fear, guilt, embarrassment, happiness, confusion and a ‘wild card’) on the part of a paper “gingerbread man” where they most notice they carry those emotions. In groups of five or six, they discuss their findings from the exercise: what they were previously aware of, and what surprised them or what they did not consciously recognize until involved in the exercise. Students continue to use the self-awareness exercise as a personal “check-in;” they also use it with their clients to help them better express their emotions and understand the role of stress. Students are also encouraged to express their feelings about embarking on their social work education in a Letter to Self: a sealed letter, to be opened upon graduation, in which they describe their hopes and expectations, fears and anxieties about the beginning of school. These exercises encourage students to move beyond their initial anxiety and “enjoy the journey,” to utilize one another and faculty as sounding boards when the road seems difficult, and to share their experiences openly and in celebration.

Community Immersion Exercise

The final day of Boot Camp is always our Community Immersion Exercise: the Bus Trip. Having randomly assigned students to groups of five on the first day of Boot Camp, they are now given the following vignette:

Stella is a 27 year old, Hispanic female. She has 3 children: Rico, aged 6, Sofia, aged 2, and Michael, aged 6 months. Her boyfriend, the father of the two younger children, is in jail for domestic violence. The police have advised her to get a restraining order to protect herself and her children before he is released. The boyfriend once told her that he would kill her and the children if she ever tried to get away from him. Now that he

is in jail, she has no financial support. She is behind in rent, and has been borrowing from friends and family to feed herself and the children. Her family has told her to “get on welfare” as they cannot continue to provide for her. She feels totally overwhelmed and has no idea where to start. She has used drugs and alcohol in the past to deal with her problems, but doesn’t want to do that again because of the children. She feels tired and scared all of the time, mostly staying in her apartment. Today, she plans to try to get some financial assistance and find out about getting that restraining order. She has no childcare and must rely on the bus to get to the agencies. In addition, Sofia is running a temperature and has a cough. She must be back in time to pick Rico up at school at 3:00 PM.

Based on the vignette above, each team is asked to prioritize the issues and research available resources for services. Students must access these resources, traveling only on public buses. (Students must provide proof of the trip by bringing back forms, brochures, business cards, etc. In addition, each group must provide photos of their day.) Students are to document the problem list as they assess it from the client profile. From this problem list, they assign priority ranking and what resources are needed. They document the agencies they attempted to access, as well as eligibility for services, observed barriers, and outcome. They provide a time table of activities, both planned and executed.

The Community Immersion Exercise has been designated by students each year as the most valuable experience in the MSW program. There have been years when the temperature has soared over 100°F, buses have been late, agencies researched are no longer in business—but students always return exhilarated from the experience. They recognize that they have just “walked in the shoes” of many clients. They recognize barriers to service, why clients may give up trying to access them, and how “eligibility” denies more services than it provides. Students have been very creative in carrying out the assignment: sending videos along with the pictures, dressing up a watermelon as a baby and placing it in a stroller, and even bringing along their own toddlers to understand what it is like to travel by bus with small children. One year, one of the students was on crutches so her teammates put her in a wheelchair and pushed her along the route, increasing awareness of those with physical disabilities.

Advanced Field Readiness

We added an Advanced Field Readiness program for second- year field students in 2009. We hoped to get students ready to jump right in by providing opportunity for critical thinking and assessment. One-day workshops are devoted to risk assessment, another to grief and loss, and a third to cooperation and teamwork. Two exercises in particular have proven to be worthwhile. In the “Trash Bag” exercise, students are each given a plastic trash bag; over four days, they write down all the “issues” they have that they are aware of on individual sheets of paper, and put them in a trash bag which

students then carry with them. On the final day, the bags are collected and faculty sort through the “issues” and put them into like piles. Students learn that they all have similar concerns, and discover, through the metaphor of dragging their trash around with them, the importance of recognizing their issues and how they affect their work. (We choose the most poignant one for framing; so far, the winners have been: “afraid I will suck as a social worker,” “afraid to ask the really tough questions,” and “afraid I will lose my safety net when I graduate.”) Students also participated in the Puzzle Exercise, in which groups of students are tasked with putting together a puzzle without talking. Unable to find the proper pieces in their group, they learn that communication, cooperation, and assessment of all possibilities are essential to problem-solving because they must share puzzle pieces with other groups in order to succeed.

Over the years, Boot Camp has been improved based on feedback from student evaluations. Workshops have been altered: training on mandated reporting now includes case examples and vignettes for discussion, and information on diagnosis and risk assessment is presented earlier. Advanced Boot Camp is currently being restructured to meet the needs of students and agencies. The initial concerns of the Faculty Advisory Committee about student readiness have been effectively addressed. Students have given positive reviews of the Boot Camp program, especially the Bus Trip exercise and presentations from social workers in different settings. Boot Camp has been proven to offer invaluable preparation for both first- and second-year students entering field placement.