



Reflections of a Career Changer

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I was an English major for my undergraduate studies at a large private college in the Boston area. I had two internships in different sections of the publishing industry. After graduating with a BA in English in 2009, I was hired for my first “real world” job as an editorial assistant for a nationally recognized medical journal. I stayed at this job for three years and fine-tuned my proofreading, editing, project management, and organizational skills. However, I felt trapped by the gray walls of my cubicle and an endless barrage of emails being my only contact with the outside world. I craved face-to-face connection. I dreamed of using my dedication, determination, and studiousness to create real change in our society. I was a psychology minor during undergrad but never thought it would go anywhere because I only enjoyed the “people side” of psychology and not the “science side” of the inner workings of the brain and pathologizing diagnoses. I mentioned to my therapist at the time that I was considering a career change. She suggested that I look into the social work field.

The more I read about social work, the more I was convinced that this was the work I was meant to do. I applied to Simmons College before their priority deadline and was awarded a partial scholarship to attend the fulltime MSW program. I began my first field placement in September of 2012. I was placed at a for-profit management company working with the resident services coordinator of a scattered site collection of affordable housing units. I was told that I would be providing support for residents who, for a variety of reasons, would be unable to fulfill the requirements of their leases. On a daily basis, I was supervised by the resident services coordinator who was not an MSW. We shared one desk, telephone, and internet connection. This was my first experience with a direct supervisor sitting next to me at all times. I wondered what she expected of me, and she wondered what I expected from the placement.

My first placement experience was disorienting. I was used to having a strictly defined role in the workplace, with explicit duties and a system of checks and balances. In this environment there seemed to be little preparation for my arrival. I had to learn a lesson that I now try to impart to my clients of sitting “in the grey” and being comfortable with being uncomfortable. I had both the pleasure and the burden of being responsible for creating my own role in the organization. I felt paralyzed by both the lack of direction and the sheer number of possibilities. As someone with

virtually no experience in the social service field, I struggled with feeling competent in my actions. I asked my social work supervisor, who would visit my placement site once a week, "What makes me qualified to sit in a room with someone and listen to their problems?" I felt like a fraud, because I was using the title "social work intern," but it didn't carry any weight because of my lack of training, experience, and knowledge. This made it difficult to find and maintain clients, because it was my responsibility to convince residents to meet with me. I had to advertise that I was available for support when I wasn't even sure that I could help anyone.

As I learned more theories in the classroom and relied on professors and fellow students for support and guidance about my experiences in the field, I encountered a new problem: I found it manipulative to persuade clients to meet with me in order to complete class and field assignments. It felt wrong to shape a session to cover the material that I needed for a paper instead of allowing the client's needs to be the priority. I routinely brought this up in supervision and was guided through the process of dismantling my guilt and feelings of being unqualified. I was tasked with replacing the doubt with confidence that in completing these assignments, I was helping my client by expanding my learning and practicing evidence-based strategies of clinical work. I had to give myself permission to try out a theory learned in class on a client and then respond appropriately and with compassion regardless of the outcome. If a client responded well to a certain structure and/or content of a session, everyone won. If a client responded poorly, we both learned that the particular strategy was not a good fit at that stage in the client's journey. As I became more comfortable in experimenting within sessions, clients reported feeling more comfortable being honest with me if something I was doing was working for them or not.

Part of my struggle was that the majority of the work I was doing was not considered clinical. The population I worked with (mostly elderly residents on fixed income or slightly younger people with significant physical and/or mental disabilities) had a lot of practical needs that did not involve what I thought was "real therapy." I spent a lot of time making phone calls and looking up resources for people who were struggling economically, occupationally or socially. I now know that a lot of what I was doing was "case management," but I had never heard that term, and it wasn't something that was spoken about in the classroom. I believe the skills I learned by connecting my clients to resources and coordinating services between medical, mental health and community providers could not have been picked up in the classroom. I needed to experience making the phone calls and accompanying clients to doctors' visits to really understand the purpose of being a social worker in an affordable housing setting. I am grateful that my first field placement was flexible enough to allow me to get out of the office and into the homes and neighborhoods of my clients.

I believe that what I witnessed of the living conditions of my clients is what spurred me to begin participating in social action at the Massachusetts statehouse. During Legislative Education and Advocacy Day (LEAD) sponsored by the Massachusetts chapter of NASW, I was exposed to how

legislation directly affects my clients and what I could do as a social worker to advocate for people who are unable to directly advocate for themselves. I signed up for NASW-MA's legislative action alerts email list and began attending committee hearings on bills that were of particular interest to me personally and professionally. I testified in support of loan forgiveness and earned paid sick time for social workers, in support of raising the minimum wage, and against welfare reforms that would place more restrictions on the eligibility of poor persons seeking government assistance. I joined the Legislative Advocacy Committee of NASW-MA and have helped determine the legislative agenda and priorities for the chapter. I consider myself a bridge between the people affected by legislation and the people that have the power to institute or strike down the legislation. Recently, I have been involved with planning this year's LEAD in Massachusetts and encouraging more social work students to attend and actively lobby their state representatives and senators for social change.

I have allowed my experiences at my second year placement to greatly influence the pieces of legislation I have actively lobbied for or against. This year, I am placed at an inpatient facility for adult women with substance use disorders. I provide counseling (both individual and group) and case management services. All of the structure that I craved but lacked in my first placement is present in my second placement. I have a definitive role, case-load, and set of expectations for my performance. My social work supervisor is on-site and available for consultation right when a conflict or question arises. I have learned from my clients and fellow counselors that certain current laws and legislation before committees have a direct impact on this population. One example is bill S.1959, which aims to ensure parity for mental health and substance abuse treatment. The bill would give clients the opportunity to sue if their rights to parity have been violated and to recoup the costs of legal action if the judgment is in their favor. This would add more weight and strength to the existing laws regarding mental health and substance abuse parity in Massachusetts. In my placement, it can be difficult for clients to be approved for further insurance coverage at the inpatient level of care for substance use disorders. The passage of this bill has the potential to increase the likelihood of clients being able to receive care for substance use disorders at the same level as they would for illnesses that insurance companies would consider strictly medical. In being both a clinician working "on the front lines" and a social justice advocate working "in the background," I have been able to appreciate the intersections between clinical and macro social work and develop my interests and skills in each arena. I feel that my clinical work in my field placement is enhanced by my dedication to larger systems change.

If you had told me in August 2012 that I would be lobbying for social justice at the statehouse on a regular basis as well as instituting careful and often successful interventions for clients on a variety of levels, I would have been flabbergasted. However, thanks to the support from Simmons professors, classmates and mentors as well as the NASW-MA, I have developed into someone who wears the title of social worker loud and proud. I am excited to earn my MSW in May, obtain my LCSW as soon as possible, and continue to use the skills I have learned in the field to further my career.

It has been a wonderful experience combining my passion for social work (and social work field education in particular) with my “former life” identity as an editorial assistant in order to help bring issues of the *Field Educator* to your screens for the past two years. I am excited to continue following the latest theories and actions in social work education by subscribing and perhaps contributing to the *Field Educator* in the future. Thank you for reading, and a big thanks to the editorial staff of the *Field Educator* for welcoming me with open arms and giving me the opportunity to be a part of this important and influential publication.