



# Conducting Macro-level Work in a Micro-focused Profession

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Social work students who are interested in macro-level work face unique challenges in applying social work's educational objectives to their field placement. Macro-level social work addresses systems that govern, impact and sometimes control our lives; it looks at an entire community as the client, identifies key areas for change, and works with community members towards solving those problems. We are concerned that few social workers are formally trained in macro-level work; this includes the vast majority of existing practitioners – both social work faculty and the social workers supervising students at field placements. The language of the core competencies specified by the Council on Social Work Education's Educational Policy (EPAS) tends to concentrate on the micro-level social worker: "evidence-based interventions designed to achieve client goals"; "collect, organize and interpret client data"; "assess client strengths and limitations"; "develop mutually agreed-on interventions"; "help clients resolve problems," etc. This language suggests that practice with individuals or family-client-systems is given higher priority than macro practice. Translating core competencies into macro-level practice objectives that can be measured and evaluated is not always easy, and takes considerable discussion on the part of the field supervisor, the student and the field instructor. How would this be applied, for example, to a student who wanted to learn how to change organizational culture to better serve constituents?

In the fall of 2010, Kara Jones, a BSW student at Marygrove College, sought to achieve this outcome in collaboration with Kathleen LaTosch, MSW, Chief Administrative Officer at Jones' placement. The placement was at Affirmations in a metro Detroit community center for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) people.

At the interview for her field placement at Affirmations, Jones requested macro-level work. Of her placement interview she said,

My personal goals at my placement were to work with committees and coalitions, and to learn grant writing and budget analysis. The core competencies became a challenge

when it came time for my field instructor and me to create a work plan addressing the competency objectives. Many of the objectives are written for students completing a micro-level social work placement.

Crafting a learning plan that would meet all core competencies required creative license and firm intentionality. The first task was to define the client system. After an exploration of learning interests and available projects, both learning partners agreed to focus much of Jones' efforts on the organization's Multicultural Advisory Committee (MAC), a project designed to research and recommend best practices to Affirmations' leadership for racial and ethnic diversity and inclusion. This two-year project was already underway and the student would take on a portion of the work.

In this case, the client system was defined as the constituent base of Affirmations – the lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender (LGBT) community within the Metro Detroit region. The focus of the work was on a complex problem: the organization lacked culturally relevant programming for an ethnically diverse LGBT community, and there was some perception within pockets of the African-American LGBT community that the organization was not culturally competent and operated from a Eurocentric framework. The strategy for change was to research and develop best practices for racial diversity and inclusion and to make recommendations to Affirmations' board of directors. In order to accomplish this, a grassroots and multiethnic community-driven Multicultural Advisory Committee (MAC) was formed and had begun meeting two years prior.

The second challenge was how to assign specific work to Jones on a variety of projects in order to accomplish learning in each core competency. In a macro-level placement, the work is expansive and can extend over a long period of time. Assessment and intervention with a community-wide client system can take months and sometimes years – well beyond the length of a field placement. Jones and LaTosch worked closely together to identify sections of the project that would provide good learning opportunities, were hands-on, and met the core competency requirements. Jones said,

Engaging client systems was also a challenge, being that I only had limited time in my field placement and working with large client systems often required rearranging of schedules due to the size of the system. I wasn't able, as a macro-level student, to sit down with my client system and assess problems on a one-on-one basis.

Jones' day-to-day work involved assisting in the creation of surveys that captured information from nonprofit organizations in the Midwest on their racial inclusiveness. She worked to administer the surveys to nonprofit staff and to collect and to analyze the data. These data would then be used as a means of establishing an industry standard and basis for comparison as staff at Affirmations set about analyzing the organization's practices.

There were several components to the Jones' work plan to fully meet the competency requirements; these were indirectly related to the MAC's work. She also organized and catalogued all human resource policies and procedures, in preparation for anticipated changes that would come from the MAC recommendations on personnel. She practiced grant writing skills in a youth program proposal to a foundation and assisted with fundraising activities to support the organization's overall ability to pursue its mission. Each activity was carefully reviewed and designed to fit within the core competencies. As LaTosch stated,

We finally ended up with a medley of activities that would both meet Kara's learning objectives and also fulfill the core competency requirements. Identifying problem areas and collecting and assessing data evolved into surveying other LGBT community centers in the Midwest for their best practices. Engaging client systems in the helping process was met by her work directly with our community-based MAC which provided direction on what changes were needed. Each competency was paired with an activity that was relevant and measurable.

When assisting macro-level students with field placements, it is critically important to have a clear understanding of the client system definition, the problem being addressed with that system, and what strategies are being used to effect change. Students and field supervisors should go into the process with an eye on the big picture, while carving out a small section of applicable and measurable work for the student. Further, it is critical to document the specific activities that correspond to each core competency at the beginning of the field placement. This makes ongoing review simple and evaluation clear. As schools and agencies work toward the implementation of EPAS competencies, more examples like this are needed.