



# Healthcare Student Social Work Orientation

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It was a Thursday in mid-August, yet the air had the slightly crisp quality of a cool autumn morning. After spending the summer outside as a camp counselor wearing flip-flops and shorts, it felt strange to be heading toward an air-conditioned conference room dressed in business casual attire. As I found my seat at the Healthcare Orientation for Social Work Students, I came to two realizations. My first thought was that the famous “last summer off ever” between the two years of graduate school was quickly winding down. My second realization was how excited I was to begin my next field placement in a hospital.

The Healthcare Orientation for Social Work Students was the result of a yearlong collaboration between eight of the major medical centers and six schools of social work in the Greater Boston area. The goal of this orientation was simple: to facilitate social work interns’ transition to field placements in healthcare settings. The learning objectives created to achieve this goal, however, were extensive. At the end of this six-hour Orientation, participants would be expected to understand the elements of the social work role in healthcare, the value of interdisciplinary teamwork, the importance of empathy in healthcare social work, the basics of psychosocial assessments, and the essential role of supervision and self-care. After brief introductions and opening remarks, this program began, reflecting the fast-paced nature of healthcare social work.

Throughout the day, various pedagogical techniques were used, appealing to multiple learning styles in the room. As a visual learner, I was particularly drawn to the video example of an interdisciplinary team meeting, which was fraught with realistic challenges. After watching the video, there was a large group discussion that included both social work interns and the facilitators. The facilitators included both field education staff from the involved schools of social work and field site supervisors from the hospitals eagerly awaiting incoming social work interns. The diverse perspectives in the room led to a broad and rich conversation about the complexities of working on teams in a hospital setting.

Perhaps the most meaningful portion of the orientation was the presentation given during lunch. A cancer survivor and the oncology social worker who worked with this survivor throughout her diagnosis, illness, and treatment both spoke about their journeys and the role of social work in the hospital setting. Suddenly everything that felt theoretical and abstract throughout the morning was real and standing right in front of me. It is stories like the one these women shared that draw people to the field of social work, and in the break out groups after this talk the general consensus among my colleagues was that we felt both inspired and humbled by the task before us. There were many takeaways from their talk, but one that has resonated with me throughout my field placement is the importance of the relationship between the patient and social worker. The women described the relationship as the cornerstone of their work together, a point that I try to remember regardless of whether I am meeting a patient or family for the first or fiftieth time.

Though I left the orientation feeling excited about my second year field placement, there was one looming question in the back of my mind, "What am I actually supposed to be doing as a social work intern in a hospital?" I am a person who is interested in logistics; perhaps it is my background in teaching, but I like structure and templates. I spent half of the orientation wondering if and how the information being presented would apply to me in my particular setting. I called my supervisors to ask how to best prepare for this field placement, for example if there were there books or articles I could read or a specific biopsychosocial outline I could study. I was told to enjoy my summer and show up on September 3rd wearing closed-toe shoes. The rest, I was assured, I would learn as the year unfolded. It appeared there was no lesson plan for this field placement.

My field placement ends in exactly three weeks. There are still some days when I sit back and wonder, "What am I actually supposed to be doing here?" Those are typically the days that simply defy a job description, escorting a family from Nepal to the cafeteria and helping them buy food with pantomime as our only form of communication, or sitting on the floor of the OR waiting room and playing with trucks with the two year old sibling of a patient. Other days are quite serious, completing an assessment in a suspected non-accidental trauma case, or participating in family meetings that involve the discussion of redirecting care. I have half-joked with my supervisors that even if I spent my entire field placement simply standing and observing from the nurses station, I would learn a tremendous amount. Of course, I am not a mere bystander. I have the opportunity to meet with families from all walks of life every day (this week alone involved families from four different states and two different countries). I have mastered the art of saying, "I don't know the answer, but I will find out" — and then asking a million questions until I do find out. I am constantly making mistakes, and then finding the courage to go back into that patient's room and try again.

Before this orientation, the extent of my hospital experience was an Emergency Room trip for a broken arm when I was nine years old. Nobody in my family works in healthcare; I simply had no frame of reference for how an inpatient medical unit in a hospital functions. This orientation provided

an overview of hospital structure, explained the process of writing a biopsychosocial assessment in a medical setting, and allowed me to make connections with fellow interns from different schools. It certainly met the goal of facilitating my transition into a field placement in a healthcare setting, although I still had that initial moment of panic when I walked through the doors of the pediatric Medical Surgical Intensive Care Unit on the first day of field placement. Though this was my second year field placement, it was, and continues to be, a year of firsts. I left this orientation in August with mixed emotions of excitement and trepidation when thinking about the task ahead. In three weeks, I will graduate with my Master's Degree in Social Work – and this same mixture of emotions. It's an ok place to be.