



Field Placements: Are our students with disabilities the pearls of the School of Social Work?

Author(s)

*Naomi White, MSW
University of Akron*

*Sandra Morales, MSW Candidate
University of Akron*

*Daniel Wright, III, MSW Candidate
University of Akron*

Starting in 2011, the University of Akron School of Social Work has developed internships for social work students within various departments of the University. Ensuring that these internships meet the expectations set forth by the Council on Social Work is challenging in itself. This year, additional complications arose when a student with physical disabilities was placed at the School of Social Work. This paper will describe how the field department and the student collaborated to overcome obstacles and make the internship a success. Narratives are included from the student and from a fellow social work student, who helped him and was helped by him in turn.

Schools of social work identify specific expectations of field agencies and field instructors, according to guidelines from the Council on Social Work Education (CSWE, 2010). For example, field agencies are expected to provide:

- A qualified field instructor, approved by the program, with sufficient time and resources to carry out field instruction responsibilities.
- Resources necessary to carry out learning assignments, such as a telephone, place to interview clients, adequate records and documents, and travel reimbursement.
- Interaction with members of diverse client populations, such as racial and ethnic minorities, gay men, lesbians and bisexuals, transgendered individuals, the aged, the poor, the disabled, and other vulnerable or oppressed groups.
- Opportunities to carry out the social work process with clients from engagement through termination.
- Exposure to group process with clients and/or staff and with opportunities to relate to community groups on behalf of the agency.
- Opportunities to participate in staff meetings, agency studies or research, agency conferences, and policy group meetings, as appropriate.
- Opportunities to employ practice knowledge, skills toward the ethical amelioration of adverse environmental conditions affecting those served by the agency.
- Staff support to maintain service delivery of the agency without reliance on students.

- Timely information to the Field Coordinator such as written descriptions of the agency's services and learning opportunities for students, acceptance of field students, and staff/policy/program changes affecting field education.

From time to time, schools of social work have found it necessary and even helpful to develop internships for social work students within the school or its affiliated university departments. In 2011-12, campus-based field placements were introduced at the University of Akron School of Social Work. For example, social work students may collaborate with law school students in the Legal Clinic around housing issues, or provide psychosocial assessments for patients at the walk-in clinic staffed by students from the School of Nursing. By 2014, social work internships were also created at the Office of Accessibility, Off-Campus Student Services, and the Office of Multi-Cultural Development. In these internships, students had a task supervisor, who was often the director of the program, and a field instructor, who was often someone from the field department.

This year, the School of Social Work developed an internship within the field department for a student who had difficulty finding an agency that could accommodate his physical disabilities. Daniel entered social work school with great hope and great commitment:

From a young age, despite my disability and the many challenges that come along with it, my family and I knew that one day I would go to college and get a degree. When I was young, even though this was a dream of mine, it seemed not only a long ways off but near impossible. I was very fortunate to grow up in a city with one of the best public school systems in the state of Ohio. I was one of the first disabled children to go through the district, starting in the early 1990s. When I began my elementary education, laws like the ADA had just come into existence, and their interpretation was unclear to many, especially those who had to provide services to disabled children like myself.

In this concentration-year internship, Daniel demonstrated competency in several areas. For example, he helped to organize Disability Awareness Week, provided workshops on assistive technology, researched issues and services related to disabilities, and conducted a survey about student attitudes toward disabilities. The field coordinator acted as task supervisor, and a field instructor also provided one hour of supervision each week.

The School of Social Work affirms its commitment to accept students without regard to age, gender, race, ethnicity, religion, sexual orientation, physical ability, or veteran status. However, the faculty and administration did not anticipate the difficulty of developing the infrastructure needed to have a student with disabilities on-site, the time required to adequately prepare the internship, and the particular needs of the student. Daniel had a limited range of motion and strength in his arms, in addition to being wheelchair-bound. He experienced difficulty opening doors and turning

doorknobs. He could not write notes, but using a laptop was difficult for him, because he had problems using the keyboard and could not easily pack and unpack the laptop. Several computers within the lab were equipped with assistive technology, defined as, “any item, piece of equipment, software or product system that is used to increase, maintain, or improve the functional capabilities of individuals with disabilities” (What is assistive, n.d.). However, using the phone was an initial challenge, as the university’s phone systems did not support the various assistive devices that were identified by both the student and his assigned Ohio Rehabilitation Services- Bureau of Vocational Services (BVR) counselor. The School had a small cubicle where most work-study students and graduate assistants would sit when they needed to use the phone and/or the computer. This area had limited space and was awkwardly configured, making it challenging for a wheelchair to fit there. As a result, the student used his cell phone for all field-related calls. Finally, placing the student in the computer lab to work on projects alone or with others was difficult because of the possible disruption his speech-recognition software might cause to other students’ work.

School administrators, especially in the field department, were required to research and identify many services, including:

- Software for hands-free communication with the student’s laptop to support his limited mobility of hands and arms;
- Software that could be placed on university-owned desktops used in the computer lab;
- Adaptive hardware to modify university-owned telephones;
- Devices to elevate the student’s laptop to reduce stress due to prolonged use and to adapt the desk to the height of the student’s wheelchair;
- Devices to assist the student in opening the social work doors, doors which complied with the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) (1990), yet which were challenging for the student to open.

Unfortunately, they did not have sufficient preparation time to begin to make adjustments to the physical environment. The work of administering both an undergraduate and graduate program in full-swing year-round, along with the varied commitments of faculty and the school director, did not leave significant room for last-minute planning. Faculty and administrators were unaware of meetings with the Bureau of Vocational Rehabilitation (BVR), the necessity for additional assistive technology, the requirements for use of office space that was previously allocated for other uses, the need to contact various campus offices to identify assistive technologies with which they were not familiar, and the ongoing requests to change features of the social work space to ensure wheelchair and other disability accessibility. Nevertheless, Daniel persevered and collaborated with school personnel in identifying and using assistive technology:

I facilitated three one-hour lectures to the campus community about assistive technology and the role it will hopefully soon play in the lives of those like me with disabilities.

To do this, I used a PowerPoint presentation, as well as a podcast and a short film. My office mate, the graduate assistant for the field department, assisted me in operating the laptop so that I was able to only focus on my presentation.

Even more important than infrastructure, like technology, is the climate of the internship, the perceptions and feelings of individuals about their work environment (Walsh, 2012). Knowles asserts that field education requires a climate that promotes “informality, mutual respect, physical comfort, collaboration rather than competition, openness, authenticity, trust, non-defensiveness and curiosity” (as cited in Ortiz Hendricks et al., 2005, p. 85). In addition to its commitment to diversity, the University of Akron School of Social Work takes pride in its relaxed and accepting environment; despite rapid expansion in both the size of the faculty and student body and the number of campus locations, the school resembles a community center. On the other hand, recent changes have created stress within this environment. For example, due to university cut-backs, weekly cleaning visits by physical facilities were discontinued, except in common areas like hallways. Providing a clean and comfortable environment in “private areas,” such as offices and suites became the responsibility of the occupants of the respective schools/departments. In addition to their assigned duties, faculty and staff also became responsible for the overall upkeep of their spaces through tasks such as emptying garbage and vacuuming. The administrative staff in the School of Social Work also assumed responsibility for the maintenance of the social work office, which included the field students’ office, computer lab, student lounge, and copy/supply/kitchen area.

A social work student, Sandra, who shared an office with Daniel, described her special efforts to support her colleague while fulfilling her responsibilities as a graduate assistant:

I spend a lot of my work hours in the main office, which seems to be the center of attraction for most faculty and students. Since I was a new graduate assistant, I learned how things in the office ran. Along with another fellow colleague who was completing his field placement, we learned how things were managed in the office. My colleague, also my office mate, was very friendly with everyone. All student employees were reminded of their duties on how to keep the office clean. His physical disability made me more aware of the impact of a disability on things I take for granted which come easy for me. I became more cognizant of what this disability meant to my colleague. For example, he needed assistance with things that required physical abilities, such as lifting, extensive range of motion, and walking. He and I had conversations about the office space we shared and how we could make things better for him, me, and any other personnel assigned to the office. We agreed on me assisting with some tasks he wasn’t physically able to do, like cleaning. I did, after all, enjoy cleaning. For me it was therapeutic. We adapted and moved forward. We needed to adapt to many things. There was that need he had, which required assistance, and he wasn’t able to do it, and I filled that gap. I

filled that gap like we were taught in the school of social work to do.

Creating a positive climate in a campus-based internship requires a concerted effort toward team building and conflict resolution; the personal generosity shown by this social work student toward Daniel helped to overcome the stress of these imposed responsibilities.

On a larger scale, Daniel worked in his internship to create a welcoming climate for students with disabilities by educating students and faculty. He describes his organizing of Disability Awareness Week:

Disability Awareness week is a week sponsored by the Office of Accessibility and several other organizations at the University. My duties include organizing and facilitating events for Disability Awareness week with the help of my field instructor, the field coordinator, and my colleague, who is a graduate assistant for the field education department. I organized and facilitated workshops highlighting disabilities and distributed accurate information on disabilities to faculty, staff, and students during this week. In one workshop, I used a wheelchair from the Nursing school, taping to it imagery and words illustrating the realities and stereotypes of what it means to have a disability and be disabled. The goal was to help able-bodied students, staff, and faculty demystify the myths and stereotypes of having a disability. This was also an opportunity for me to see how people responded to me.

However, as Linda Cherry Reeser (1992) points out, "Students are relied on to provide the education [about disabilities...We need] in-service training for faculty and content on disabilities in orientations, in workshops for field instructors, and in the curriculum" (p. 41). To be accessible to students with disabilities, especially if they are to function as internship sites, social work schools must put in place opportunities for training and consultation as well as adequate infrastructure and support services.

The challenge experienced by all participants of adapting a campus-based internship to a social work student with disabilities has produced unique benefits for Daniel, for Sandra, and for the entire school of social work. For Daniel, the process has been both formative and supportive:

It is currently fall, and I'm in my last year of my MSW program. As I sit here and write the story and look back on all that I've achieved, I still cannot believe that it is real and that I soon will be a master's level social worker. I hope that by the completion of my field placement, I will have made a significant contribution towards enabling all disabled students to fulfill and live up to all their aspirations and dreams regarding their education. I do not know what life has in store for me at the end of this exciting journey, but whatever it is, I'm sure with the support of all those around me, I will have

no problem achieving great things.

Sandra learned from Daniel about living with a disability:

After we made arrangements of office duties, we focused more on getting to know each other and less on what was going on outside of our workspace. We started interacting more. We enjoyed each other's company. At times, we would grab our lunch and eat it together and discuss different topics. Through my discussion with my colleague, I learned so many new things about him, such as the fact that even though he had a disability, he lived and is living a life not defined by his disability. He enjoys swimming, bowling and movies. The most important thing I remember about interacting with my colleague is that he is a human. Humans are all different. He is also different in how he manages his disability. My colleague demonstrates patience with accessibility barriers and is appreciative and supportive of people trying to assist him with destroying these barriers. He always figured out ways he could be involved in being a part of social work student organizations' activities. If he wants to do something, he figures it out and does not wait on others to figure it out for him. I have watched and listened when it took him multiple phone calls to get things accomplished. However, his determination never slowed down.

He was always so engaging to me and anyone who would listen about the world of disabilities and educating people about accessibility issues. Yes, this is to say that I am so thankful to have had someone like my colleague, my office mate, to teach me the reality of the world of disabilities with humor, honesty, and integrity.

Daniel also taught both Sandra and the field coordinator about staying in the present:

Interacting with my colleague, I am more apt to stop, sit down, and relax. I try to make sure I am also able to see him, because nonverbal communication with him tells me a lot. I also tend to talk slower and just take my time with the discussion we are having. I find myself dedicating more time on communication and truly being in the present. When my colleague, the field coordinator, and I interact together, we all try to be able to see each other when talking. We also tend to slow the pace down and the environment feels calmer as well. We also tend to open up a little bit more and be more personable.

The benefits experienced by all participants will continue into the future. Educators sometimes ask if students with a disability can function in the "real world" after school. Daniel is planning for his future in the work world. He immediately began to brainstorm inventions that could assist him in independently opening doors, while also revisiting his range of motion and, with daily targeted

exercise, strengthening those muscles needed to open the door. He figured out that by placing a looped string on his office door, he could open the door and enter independently once it had been unlocked by office staff. He devised a way to use the body of his wheelchair along with his arms to increase his independence in entering without calling for assistance as often. Even more important, perhaps, is the question of whether the school of social work will retain the knowledge it gained from accommodating Daniel. Here again Daniel is planning for the future:

I am currently working on a survey to gauge university attitudes toward students with disabilities. We anticipate that the survey results will allow us to make recommendations to the campus-wide community on effective strategies to work with differently-abled students toward academic success. We are trying to assess things like how accessible is the campus; how easy is it for students to get around from point A to point B; ease of using transportation services provided by the campus, and the impact of faculty and staff in helping students reach their goals and live up to their full potential, despite their disability.

According to a Rutgers (2012) study, "...college graduates with disabilities...attributed their academic success to a combination of possessing strong personality traits [like] perseverance and [to] their relationship with a faculty or staff mentor." Field education departments within schools of social work are exploring how to prepare on-site placements and develop placements within the community for students with disabilities. The success of this initiative, partnering a strong student with disabilities with a supportive colleague and a committed field education department, indicates that these efforts can succeed.

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